

Invitation to the Wedding

By: lord of the land of fire

Shikamaru and Temari are secretly engaged and the big day is coming. They are both eager to begin their new lives together but they are shinobi and nothing is certain. Will they see their wedding day? Not everyone will survive. Shi X Tem, Nar X Hin

Status: complete

Published: 2007-11-17

Updated: 2008-07-13

Words: 82568

Chapters: 27

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Romance/Humor - Characters: Shikamaru N., Temari - Reviews: 729 - Favs: 442 - Follows: 195

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3896694/1/Invitation-to-the-Wedding>

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Invitation to the Wedding

[Introduction](#)

[The birthday present](#)

[Welcome home](#)

[Days in the life](#)

[Nothing could be easier](#)

[Give you what you want](#)

[What friends are for](#)

[Return to Konoha](#)

[Without warning](#)

[Aftermath](#)

[An announcement](#)

[Live in the moment](#)

[Late departure](#)

[A favor](#)

[A sacred male tradition](#)

[Deceptions and secrets](#)

[A tragic death](#)

[Terrible news](#)

[Passing judgment](#)

[What am I to you?](#)

[Given freely](#)

[At the crossroads](#)

[Last of the Uchiha](#)

[A funeral](#)

[A really big house](#)

[The ambush](#)

[A new last name](#)

The Day.

The birthday present

Author's Note: To all of you who have read the previous two stories in this trilogy welcome back! To all new readers I hope you enjoy the story. I would recommend reading the first two but if you don't want to that's why I have a synopsis. This will indeed be the end of the Invitation trilogy. I only hope everyone will enjoy this one as much as they enjoyed the first two. As with the series so far Temari and Shikamaru are the central characters but there will also be quite a bit written about some of the others. Oh and just so you all know I don't promise that everyone will get a happy ending or even survive.

Synopsis: Following the failed mission to retrieve Sasuke Temari embraces Shikamaru in the hospital as he weeps. From this one simple act their love begins to grow. Before leaving for home Temari promises Shikamaru a kiss if he visits her in Suna. Shortly thereafter he, Ino, and Chouji go to Suna. There romance blossoms for the young couple. Their love is nearly destroyed when Shikamaru barely survives an assassination attempt. Blaming herself Temari chooses to end things between them. Fortunately Shikamaru is able to convince her that their love is worth all risks. Before leaving they are secretly engaged. Returning home Shikamaru tells Naruto he knows about Kyuubi. He also tells him that they are still friends and that he believes Naruto will be Hokage one day. Thinking Naruto will need a lot of good advice he makes a bet with Naruto. Naruto agrees to make Shikamaru his future Chief advisor if he can get him a girlfriend in one day. Shikamaru wins the bet by getting Naruto to ask Hinata out on a date. Some months later two sets of Chunin exams take place. Tsunade holds a separate examination in Konoha while the regular exams are held in Mist. Prior to the exams Shikamaru has made Jonin. He watches as Naruto takes his spot temporarily so that his squad can compete. While in Mist for the regular exams Temari spots Sasuke. Sending a coded message to Shikamaru the Hokage sends a secret mission out to capture the missing nin. Led by Kakashi the mission is successful and Sasuke is returned home. During the Leaf exams Naruto, Hinata, Lee, Neji, Tenten, Chouji, and

Kiba are promoted to Chunin. Before leaving on his apprenticeship with Jiraiya Naruto confesses the truth about Kyuubi to Hinata and asks her if she will wait for him. Hinata tells him that it does not change what she feels for him and that she will wait for him to return to her. During the month layover in the regular Chunin exams Temari is permitted to spend three weeks in Konoha being trained by Nara Shikaku. During this time she is accepted as a part of the Nara clan and comes to love her new clan and home. During the bloody finals of the exams Gaara is nearly killed when he refuses to transform into Shukaku. Nevertheless all three sand siblings survive and are promoted to Chunin. Upon their return to Suna Gaara is informed that he has been chosen to be Kazekage. As Kazekage he informs Temari that she will be moving to Konoha permanently to act as ambassador. There is a **lot** more but that should do for a start. Now please enjoy.

365

"So where's Temari?" Chouji asked as he ate his third piece of birthday cake.

"Oh she's out somewhere." Shikamaru said blandly.

"What? You mean she's not even here to attend your party?" Irmana said in shock.

"Well she was here earlier."

She had pulled him into her room and quickly shut the door. After a bit of kissing and hugging she called a halt. "Listen lazy I'm going to get going in a minute. I'm afraid I won't be able to stay for the party."

"What?" He looked at her in horror. "But I'm turning 15! I thought you and I would..."

"Yes?" She asked innocently.

He frowned at her feeling really hurt. "You made a promise!"

"Did I? I don't seem to recall. What did I promise exactly?"

He felt himself blushing. "Well, uhm, you sort of said that, uhm... when I turned fifteen that well..."

"Yes?" The way she just stood there grinning at him he felt as if he were under a spotlight.

"Never mind," he mumbled feeling completely crushed.

She shrugged. "Anyway I wanted to give you my present before I left." She took out a tiny flat box perhaps two square inches and handed it to him. "Here you go."

"This is your present?" He asked dubiously.

"Haven't you ever heard that good things come in small packages?" She gave him a quick kiss. "Be sure to open that when you're alone, bye!"

He watched her go not believing she was skipping out of his party. Glumly he opened up her present. What he found inside was a key and a business card for the Falling Leaf, the top hotel in Konoha. Flipping the card over he saw some writing on the back. *Suite 500 7:00p.m. Don't come early. Don't come late. Don't knock.* Shikamaru slowly smiled as he thought he just might get what he wanted for his birthday after all.

"It's all right we have something planned for later."

Irmana's eyes lit up. But Chouji asked. "Like what?"

"Oh just something."

"Oh Chouji want to try some ice cream with that cake?" Irmana mentioned off handedly. Chouji nodded and the two of them headed

off. Irmana sent her cousin an encouraging smile.

Looking around Shikamaru decided it was a very strange party. His mom had put it together of course, with a little help from Temari. It was a kid's party even though there were no children present. There were kids' games no one was playing. There was of course cake and ice cream and silly hats. He got the feeling his mom was having a tough time admitting he wasn't so little anymore.

The dance floor was where the guests could act like adults. He looked at all the couples. Asuma was dancing with Kurenai. Of course they were, 'just friends.' Sure, and he and Temari weren't really a couple either. There was Ino with her latest boy toy. What was his name Keni, Keno? Shikamaru shrugged it didn't really matter. They had been together for close to a month now which meant he had just about reached his expiration date. Ino had chased after Sasuke for about six months. But apparently she'd finally gotten tired of his indifference. That was when she began what he, Temari, and Chouji called her boy of the month club. She had run through a long list of boyfriends with none of them lasting more than a month. Her reputation had suffered a bit. Especially after that disastrous week long, 'thing,' with Kiba. If even half the things Kiba said were true! Ino denied everything of course and their break up had been so acrimonious that Yamanaka and Inuzuka were still on bad terms. His mom had decided it would be best not to invite Kiba. She had invited Sasuke even though he still had no nice thoughts about the Uchiha. The stuck up had refused which Shikamaru thought was for the best.

Thoughts of Sasuke naturally sent his eyes to where Sakura and Lee were dancing. They easily had the strangest relationship of anyone there. Stranger even than Neji and Tenten who were also dancing. Those two were more than friends and less than a couple; but at least they both knew who they wanted. Lee and Sakura had been together for over a year now. If together was the right word for what they had. If you asked Lee Sakura was his girlfriend and they were dating. If you asked Sakura she would tell you how wonderful and sweet Lee was to her. She would tell you he was special to her and

that she cared for him. What she wouldn't say was that he was her boyfriend. If you asked her if she and Lee were a couple she would dance around the subject. Not really confirming or denying anything. When Lee called her his girlfriend she never corrected him. When he told her he loved her she thanked him and kissed him but never said it back. She would often go watch him train, but only when he was working with Sasuke. It seemed painfully obvious to everyone but Lee that she was still in love with her former teammate. Given the little fact that Lee and Sasuke were both training under Guy that made things interesting.

There was Hinata politely turning down *another* request for a dance. Who would have ever guessed that shy little Hinata would turn into such a beauty? Back in her academy days she had been so shy and quiet as to be nearly invisible despite being a Hyuga. Well the days of Hyuga Hinata being easy to miss were behind her. Not only was she one of the top kunoichi in the village. She had *developed* into one of Konoha's most ravishing beauties as well. She had an endless line of admirers who were always looking for a date. She politely, but firmly, turned them all down. She refused to accept any of the flowers, candies, or love letters that were sent to her. She had loudly proclaimed that there was only one man whom she loved and wanted. Until his return she would wait for him faithfully.

She and Temari had grown to become good friends. Naruto had gone to stay with the Sabaku clan for a week. While there he and Jiraiya had been convinced by Gaara to extend their stay to a couple months so they could witness Gaara's coronation as Kazekage. During that time Temari had grown rather fond of the hyperactive blonde. Upon her arrival in Konoha as ambassador she had delivered a letter and some gifts to Hinata on Naruto's behalf. The two had grown close. Their friendship based on their mutual affection for Naruto. It amazed Shikamaru how the loud ninja could bring people together even when he was hundreds of miles away.

"Bye mom, bye dad, I have to go meet Temari."

Yoshino gave her son a fishy stare. "You're leaving your own party?"

"Well I sort of have to. Temari has something planned for me." He managed to sound disinterested but couldn't keep just the slightest color from touching his cheeks.

His parents shared a certain look and Shikamaru readied himself for a painful series of comments and questions. "Well you don't want to keep Temari waiting dear." She gave her son a peck on the cheek and headed towards the kitchen.

"Have fun Shika." His dad gave him a nod and followed his wife. Relieved at not being put through the usual painful interrogation he slipped out of the House and headed for the Falling Leaf.

"My little baby is about to become a man." Yoshino said morosely.

"He's been a man for quite awhile now." Shikaku said.

"Maybe we're wrong about all this." She said hopefully.

"Dear when Temari booked the honeymoon suite I don't think she was doing it so they could play shogi."

"I know." She said glumly. "Still I'm glad he waited as long as he did."

Shikaku chuckled. "Oh I think Temari had more to do with that decision than he did."

She sighed. "I'm old."

Shikaku took his wife into his arms and pulled her close. "You are as beautiful now as on the day I met you." He gave her a long slow kiss and let his hands run along her back and a bit lower. "Shall we go upstairs?" He whispered.

"We have guests." She reminded him.

"So?"

She laughed and shook her head, suddenly not feeling quite so old. "Fine, but try to be quiet. No screaming all right?" Nodding he took her hand and led her upstairs.

He arrived outside the suite door at precisely 6:55. Though he was quivering with anticipation he decided to wait. He didn't want to do anything that would upset her. After the five longest minutes of his life he took out the key and slipped it into the lock. The door opened. The lights were turned off but it wasn't dark. Dozens of candles gave off a soft and warm light. The scent of jasmine hung sweetly in the air. Along the floor there was a path of rose petals leading to another open door.

"Temari?" He called nervously. There was no reply. He shut and locked the door behind him. His heart was pounding and his hands were shaking. He could not remember ever being this nervous and scared. And he had come close to death in three separate occasions. Taking a deep breath he followed the path of rose petals. When he got to the door he looked inside. There she was. She was lying on a large plush bed wearing nothing but a white silk teddy. Her hair was loose and some of it was draped over one shoulder. One hand cradled her face while the other rested on a smooth and creamy thigh.

She smiled at him in a way that filled his mind with wicked and wonderful thoughts. "Happy birthday Shikamaru." She said in a voice that could have melted butter. She let her hand run slowly along her thigh. "Do you like your present?"

Nodding dumbly he pulled off his Jonin vest. "It's *exactly* what I wanted."

Her tongue ran slowly over her red lips. "Are you coming to me or are you waiting for me to *crawl* over to you?" She purred.

He felt a shudder work its way through his entire body. In an instant he was lying on top of her in the bed. His jacket and shirt seemed to disappear. His mouth was on hers eagerly kissing and searching. He felt her warm and tender body pressed beneath his. She grabbed both his hands and put them where he'd been trying to get them for more than a year. He gasped in pure pleasure. They were a wonder to behold and to feel.

"I love you!" He panted.

"I love you too. Now get those pants off!"

There were soft caresses, hard scratches, kisses, bites, a little pain, and much greater pleasure. They hurt each other and pleased each other and broke each other in. At last as they were both happily spent they lay cuddling together under the thick blankets.

"How was it?" She asked, feeling just a little vulnerable and exposed.

"Amazing." His voice was so truthful and filled with wonder that she couldn't help but sigh and try to hold him even closer. She felt completely at peace and completely certain that he was the one. What they had just done could not be anything but right. He looked at her and gently stroked her hair. "Did it hurt?" He whispered.

"Yes, but only a little and in a good way." She took a hold of his hand and pressed it to her cheek. She loved his hands. They were so soft and gentle and they knew *exactly* the right way to touch her.

"Why are you crying?" He asked her tenderly.

"Because I am so happy."

"I love you Temari."

"I love you Shikamaru."

Nothing would have pleased them more than to have stayed in that nice warm bed all night. But they knew it wasn't possible if they wanted to keep things a secret. They made it back to the house a little after midnight. Both of them were relieved to see it was quiet and all the lights were off. They shared a good night kiss in the darkened hallway before he went to his room and she went to hers.

The next morning they all sat down to the usual big breakfast. Temari and Shikamaru had come up with the cover story that they had enjoyed a nice romantic dinner followed by an evening of dancing. They were both relieved when Yoshino accepted that without comment. Yoshino patiently waited until the two of them were drinking tea.

"So are you both still virgins?" She asked blandly.

Instantly they were spitting up tea and trying not to choke. Yoshino sent her husband a tiny grin. This was going to be fun.

Welcome home

At the sight of the open gates and the village just beyond it the blonde let out a shout of pure joy. As he ran happily back to his home a wild rush of thoughts went through his mind; Iruka, my apartment, Sakura-chan, Sasuke teme, baachan, Shikamaru, Ichiraku ramen, Hinata-chan, Hinata-chan, Hinata-chan!!

"Slow down kid there's no need to be in such a rush!"

"Are you kidding ero-sennin? I've been gone for more than two years!" He ran up the side of a column and stood at the top. "Hey Konoha! Uzumaki Naruto has come home!" He shouted for all to hear. Looking out over the village he decided it looked just as it had when he left. *Oh I guess they added baachan to the cliff.*

"Naruto-kun! Naruto-kun is that you?"

He looked down to see a pink haired girl in a red dress calling up to him. "Sakura-chan!" He leapt down.

"Naruto I've missed you!" On impulse she ran up and gave her old teammate a hug. Grinning like a madman he returned it.

"Hey Sakura-chan I've missed you too! It's great to see you again!"

As she stepped back she noticed something. "Hey! You're taller than me."

"Huh?" He put his hand on the top of his head and sent it out. Sure enough he was a couple inches taller. "Hah! I guess I am."

"Let me look at you Naruto-kun." Along with getting taller it also looked like he had gained some muscle tone. He was wearing black pants and jacket that had a thin stripe of orange along the side. He had on his Chunin vest over his jacket. His blonde hair was still spiky

and looked a bit longer. She thought he looked quite handsome. He actually reminded her a little of pictures she'd seen of the Yondaime. She gave him a very warm smile. "You've grown very handsome Naruto, you really look like a man."

Naruto blushed and scratched the back of his head. He gave her one of his big foxy grins. "Ah thank you Sakura-chan."

Feeling herself blush a bit she put her hands behind her back and gave him a demure little smile. "What do you think of how I look? Have I become more womanly since you last saw me?"

He gave her a thumbs up. "Don't worry about it Sakura-chan you look the same as you always have!"

Her mood suddenly darkened as she felt a vein throb in her forehead. Looking on Jiraiya just shook his head. *Kid you just don't understand a woman's heart.*

"Hey is that you Naruto?" A familiar voice called to him. Looking around he spotted Shikamaru and Temari coming down the street. They were holding hands. "I thought so, welcome back." Shikamaru said.

"Hey Shikamaru, hey Temari." Seeing them holding hands he gave them a lopsided grin. "So are you two still dating?"

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. "What a silly question. Of *course* we are."

Temari gave him a little grin. "Though I'm not always sure why."

"Hey Temari how is Gaara doing?" Naruto asked. "I haven't seen him since the coronation."

"Well why don't you wait a couple days and you can ask him yourself? He'll be in Konoha the day after tomorrow."

"Seriously?" Naruto asked excitedly.

"That's right he's coming here in person to sign the treaty of alliance and friendship between our two villages." She sent Shikamaru a sideways glance. "He may also be making one or two announcements."

"Say Naruto, Temari and I have been working on the upcoming Chunin exams along with the treaty. How would you like to help put them on?" Shikamaru asked.

"Oh! You want me to be a proctor?" Came his eager response.

"Not quite." Shikamaru replied. "I was thinking you could help with security on the second phase." Before Naruto could answer a woman's voice cried out his name.

"Naruto-kun!"

Naruto turned to see a beautiful girl running towards him. "Hinata-chan!" He began to run towards her with arms wide open.

Seeing that as an invitation she leapt into his waiting arms. He easily caught her and spun her around laughing. "Welcome home Naruto-kun!" Hinata wrapped her arms around his neck and eagerly kissed him. As he stopped spinning he carefully set her down with his arms tight around her waist. Neither of them seemed to mind kissing in public anymore. Temari and Shikamaru looked on the scene with fondness. Sakura felt a slight twinge that inner Sakura insisted could *not* possibly be jealousy. Jiraiya was busy writing in a notebook.

When they finally had to come up for air Naruto gave her a face splitting grin. "Hey Hinata-chan! Not so shy anymore, huh?" She blushed a bit and broke eye contact. Naruto took a step back to get a better look at her. Knowing he might be coming home today Hinata had decided to forgo her jacket. She had on tight black pants that halted just below her knees. An equally tight fitting shirt was short enough to expose her wonderfully flat tummy. As she and Temari had planned her outfit showed off all her... assets quite well. Naruto

summed up his opinion rather succinctly. "Wow! Hinata-chan you are so hot!"

Her blush deepened but she looked up to reveal a pleased smile. "Thank you Naruto-kun. I think you are even *more* handsome now than you were before."

He pulled her close and gave her a kiss that told her she had definitely made the right decision to wait for him. Watching them go Shikamaru and Temari made the mutual decision to go visit their favorite hotel. Sakura found herself day dreaming about a certain too proud ninja holding her and kissing her like that. Jiraiya smiled and continued writing. *Kid I take it back. Maybe you do understand a woman's heart.*

"Shouldn't you be checking in with Lady Tsunade?" She asked but still followed him inside.

"Oh baachan won't mind if I'm a little late." Taking a look around he was amazed by what he saw. "I was expecting my apartment to be kind of dusty. It looks great."

"I stopped by every couple of weeks to dust and look after your things."

He smiled at her and she could feel her knees get weak. "You're amazing Hinata-chan." He put his hands on her hips and gave a little squeeze that brought her up onto her toes. "Really amazing." His voice was low and just the sound of it made her heart beat faster.

"Oh... it... it wa... was nothing."

She began to panic as he moved his face in close. Rather than her lips his mouth aimed at the base of her neck. She also felt his strong hands slide around and behind her hips. "Oh!" She gasped at the feel of a little bite. She could feel herself begin to shake and get very hot as his hands gently squeezed and his mouth and tongue made

the slow journey up the side of her neck. *Where did Naruto-kun learn to do this?* He gave her ear a little nibble and a delicious shiver ran down her spine.

"Hinata-chan?" He breathed hot in her ear.

"Ye... yes... Naruto-kun?" She got out as she pressed herself against him.

"I've really missed you my Hinata-chan."

My Hinata-chan, she thought happily. "I've missed you too Naruto-kun." She could feel how hard and muscled his body was. It was a man's body.

"I've had dreams about you." His voice ached.

"Oh?" She wasn't hot now, she was burning. And oh! How she wanted to burn!

"Naughty dreams." His endless blue eyes filled her vision, his body filled her senses, and the warmth of his touch consumed her soul.

"Me too." She wrapped her legs around his back her arms around his neck and her mouth was pressed eagerly against his.

Awkwardly but quickly he carried her to his bed.

"Where is he?" Tsunade demanded.

"I don't know." Jiraiya said sheepishly.

"You are his sensei! How can you not know where he is?"

"Well he left with the little Hyuga girl so I decided to give them some privacy."

"You pick a fine time to develop a conscience!" She turned to one of the other two people in the room. "Fine, we'll take care of some other business first. Sasuke."

"Yes Hokage-sama?"

"Over the past two plus years you have successfully completed ninety five D-rank missions without issue or complaint. I have also received a number of highly satisfactory reports on you from Might Guy." She eyed him expectantly. "Is it your wish to become again a shinobi of the Leaf?"

"It is." He answered seriously.

"Do you feel you can obey the orders of your superiors?"

"I can Hokage-sama."

"Do you understand that should you ever betray this village again you will be declared a missing nin and hunted down and killed?"

"I do."

"Very well then." She held out a brand new hitai-ite. "I restore you to the rank of Genin. Jiraiya will remove the seal. I intend to place you, Sakura, and Naruto on the same team again under Kakashi. Officially you will no longer be team seven, you will be team Kakashi."

The other person in the room smiled excitedly. "Oh Sasuke-kun that's wonderful!" Sakura cooed. "It'll be just like the old days."

Sasuke gave her a frosty look. "Be sure to tell your boyfriend the good news. I'm sure Lee will be excited to know we'll be spending so much time together."

"Did I hurt you?"

The scratches on his back still smarted but he shook his head. "It's nothing and I heal fast. Did I hurt you Hinata-chan?"

"Yes, but it's all right. I'm a medic nin and I've already healed myself." Seeing his look of worry she explained. "It's only like this the first time; it won't be like this from now on."

He squeezed her a little tighter beneath the blankets. "I'm sorry that I hurt you Hinata-chan, I never want to do that."

"You didn't hurt me Naruto-kun; you made me very, very happy." She rested her head on his chest and let herself enjoy the feel of his arms protectively around her. "Naruto-kun?"

"Yes Hinata-chan?"

She didn't want to cause a problem, but a part of her needed to know. "Where did you learn to do all that? It was wonderful, but where did it come from?"

"Oh, well I sort of read all of Jiraiya's books. They're sort of a how to manual on how to please women."

Suddenly alarmed she lifted her head to get a clear look at his eyes. "Have you been with other girls?" In the whole time he'd been away she'd never thought to worry about that. Her faith in him was total.

She could see the shock in his face as he answered. "No! Hinata I swear all I ever did was read! Until today I've never been with a girl. I love you and only you Hinata-chan."

For someone trained in reading body language spotting a lie was easy, and Naruto wasn't lying. She could see the truth in his eyes and felt a wave of relief. "I believe you Naruto-kun." She rested her head on his chest again. "And I love you too."

After a few minutes she lifted her head again. "Naruto-kun?"

"Yes Hinata-chan?"

She gave him a little smile and he could feel her fingertips dancing across his chest. "Want to go again?"

"Really?!"

Seeing his eagerness she giggled and nodded. "I've healed myself so I'm not sore. So if you wan... mmmm!"

She was cut off by his lips. Naruto had always had incredible endurance. Something for which he'd never been more grateful.

"Where have you been?" Tsunade demanded.

"I was just uhm, hanging out with Hinata."

"That was three hours ago! Even Kakashi's been kept waiting. Just what could you have been doing that would have taken three hours?"

"Uhm..." Put on the spot Naruto began to blush and try to look anywhere but at Tsunade. All at once the truth dawned on everyone.

"Oh!" Tsunade said.

Kakashi grinned beneath his mask and applauded.

"Congratulations dobe." Sasuke smirked.

Sakura just stared at him incredulously. Inner Sakura: **Three hours! Boy did Hinata ever luck out!**

Jiraiya burst into tears of pride and joy. "That's my apprentice!"

The two Akatsuki members sat around their campfire. "Tomorrow?" One of them asked.

"Tomorrow." The other confirmed.

Days in the life

Author's Note: I was actually planning to save this chapter for later in the story. But a bunch of people have been curious about what happened to Shikamaru and Temari at the end of Chapter one. Far be it from me not to give the readers what they want.

She was standing in the Hokage's office in a formal audience, along with Shizune and a few members of the Council and a certain member of the Nara clan. Tsunade carefully went over the documents that Temari had presented her. That was mostly for show for the Council members.

Putting the documents down she gave Temari a very satisfied smile. "Well everything seems to be in order. I am very pleased to formally welcome you back to Konoha Ambassador Temari. May I say that it is a special honor to have the Kazekage's own sister here in that role. Nothing could better show the Kazekage's sincere interest in improving the relations between our two villages." That was also for the benefit of the Council.

Temari offered Tsunade a bow. "Thank you Hokage-san. Along with his letter my brother asked me to express our mutual desire not only for a renewed friendship between Leaf and Sand but also an eventual restoration of our alliance."

"That may prove quite difficult." Council leader Koharu spoke up. "As you well know Leaf and Sand had just such an alliance for many years. That alliance was terminated by the unprovoked attack of less than a year ago. I know that you are aware of this as both you and your brother the Kazekage were part of the attacking forces."

With those words followed a heavy silence.

"That is true." Temari answered in a quiet but dignified tone. "The previous Kazekage ordered the attack and we obeyed the order. Perhaps you would like to know who it was that singlehandedly defeated my brother, the most powerful Sand shinobi, during that attack. The Leaf nin who defeated him was one Uzumaki Naruto. The same Uzumaki Naruto that my brother and I now proudly call friend. He and his sensei, the legendary Jiraiya, have enjoyed an extended stay at my family home and were honored guests at my brother's coronation. If two former enemies can become good friends then is it truly so impossible to believe that our two villages can as well?"

Temari knew what many of the Council members thought of Naruto. It gave her the deepest satisfaction to witness their distress as she heaped praise on him. She was also sure they would have a hard time digesting the fact that Naruto was a personal friend of the Kazekage's.

"You make a fine point ambassador." Tsunade spoke up. "I am certain that we can all agree that it is in our own best interests to be friends rather than enemies." There were a few questioning looks but no one actually disagreed. "Now I have arranged a hotel suite for you until a permanent residence can be acquired."

"Actually Hokage-san that will not be necessary." She sent Shikamaru a sly smile. "The Nara clan have graciously offered me living quarters and I have accepted their generous offer."

Tsunade sent them both a wry look. "I can see where you might. However are you absolutely certain you would not prefer your own private residence?"

Temari nodded vigorously. "The Naras have embraced me and I in turn treasure them. I feel as comfortable in the Nara household as I do in my own." She gave Shikamaru another side long glance. "There is nowhere else I would rather be."

"What did you want to talk about dear?" Yoshino asked. They were all sitting around the kitchen table. "Since you asked to have a 'meeting' I presume it's important."

"Oh it is mom." She looked a bit embarrassed.

Shikaku smiled. "Well daughter I know I'm curious. What is all this about?"

"Well... it's sort of a monetary matter."

"You're not wanting to pay us rent are you?" Shikaku asked.

"Don't be ridiculous dear!" Yoshino put in. "You are family and don't have to give us anything to stay here."

"Oh no it's not that!" She assured them.

"Well then what is it?" Shikaku asked still amused.

She let out a breath. "It's about my dowry."

"You have a dowry?" Shikamaru sounded surprised. "I don't think any clans in Konoha still practice that tradition, not even the Hyuga. I know we haven't for at least three generations."

"Well Suna is more traditional. All the noble houses there use dowries to make sure someone suitable will marry them." She frowned. "It's sort of like a bribe."

Shikamaru smiled. "In that case yours must be pretty big."

"Shikamaru!" Yoshino scolded.

Temari sent him a flat look. "You know lazy I'm starting to think you should be the one bribing me."

Shikaku chuckled. "I won't say you're wrong daughter, but let's get back to the matter at hand."

Temari slowly nodded. "That way it usually works is that upon marriage the money is handed over to the groom's family and it's theirs to do with as they please. The only condition is that should the husband ever divorce his wife the full amount must be returned to her."

Shikamaru nodded. "I see, so it's really a bribe to marry the girl and stay married to her isn't it?"

"You could look at it that way." She said unhappily. "I know my own worth and I know you love me for me. But my dowry is attached to me and it needs to be dealt with."

Shikamaru shrugged. "Well there's no rush, we have a couple years to deal with it."

"Actually I talked to Gaara before coming here. I didn't know what the finances of Nara were you see. My brother agreed that due to the unusual circumstances I could give you access to half of it now."

Yoshino smiled. "Well that was nice of you dear, but we don't need any financial help. Our clan has a net worth of over one million ryu." She said proudly. "You and Shikamaru can use the money how you like. How much is your dowry dear?" Looking profoundly uncomfortable Temari looked at the floor and mumbled something. "What was that dear?"

Looking back up she took a deep breath. "I said five million. My dowry is five million ryu. Half of which is available to you now."

They all stared at her with open mouths. She felt terrible; the last thing she wanted was for any of them to start looking at her in a different way.

"So," Shikamaru said slowly. "Five million ryu to marry you and stay married to you." He rubbed his chin as though carefully pondering that fact. "Yeah, that seems about right."

He felt her killer intent and made it to the back door just as she was pulling out her fan.

"Get back here!" She chased him out the door.

"What do you think?" Yoshino calmly sipped some tea.

"I wonder if the Namikaze estates are available for sale." Shikaku said.

792

"Stop it!" She grabbed his hand by the wrist and yanked it down. She then pushed him away bringing their make out session to an abrupt end.

"What?' He complained.

"Your hands were wandering." She said firmly.

"Oh come on Temari!"

"Stop whining it doesn't... ack!" She suddenly jumped up. "It's back!"

"Huh?" Looking down at the base of the hill he spotted a large buck poking his head out of the forest. "Oh it's the same one as before." Standing up he tried to put his arms around her only to have her hold him off. "What's wrong?"

She stared at him as though he were insane. "You don't really expect me to make out with you while we're being watched do you?"

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. "He's only a deer Temari I promise he won't tell anyone."

"Pervert!" She stomped away.

"Troublesome." He muttered. Taking out a piece of bread he made a clicking sound.

767

She looked between the two of them. "It's one of you I know." She said grimly.

They all smiled. "Well make a choice." They all said in the same pleasant voice.

She placed her hand on the one to her right. Immediately he disappeared in a puff of smoke. "Damn it!" She poked the one to her left in his chest. Sure enough this time she made solid contact. "I knew it was one of you two."

"You didn't wait five minutes." Shikaku chuckled and dispelled the rest of his bushins. "It only took you six tries this time."

She frowned. "It's still not good enough. Shikamaru can do this without even trying."

"Shikamaru has been doing this since he was six." Shikaku reminded her. "After a few years you'll be just as good as he is."

"Years?" she said glumly.

He smiled at her cheerfully. "Think of it as quality father daughter time."

752

"Oh hey you two!" Ino called out to them.

"Hey Ino." Shikamaru said.

"Hey, who is this?" Temari asked.

Ino glowed and put her arm around the taller red haired boy. "This is Renji my boyfriend!"

"What happened to Hitsuguya?" Shikamaru asked.

"Oh him? He didn't understand me at all! Renji gets me! Come on honey I'll let you but me lunch."

The two of them watched as the new couple left.

"Too bad, I kind of liked Hitsuguya." Temari said.

Shikamaru shrugged. "Maybe this one will last."

"I give it a month."

742

Asuma smiled. "You know Shikamaru if you wanted to spend more time with your girlfriend you could have just asked."

"I think Temari is afraid to let him out of her sight." Chouji teased.

Shikamaru tried to ignore them. "Temari what are you doing here?"

Temari smiled at him innocently. "I'm just going to tag along in case you run into any scary flute players."

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. "Temari, Asuma, Chouji, and I are going on an extended B-rank mission to river country. You can't just tag along. You have your own responsibilities as ambassador now remember?"

She pulled out a folded sheet of paper and handed it to him. "Here you go sweetie pie." Asuma and Chouji both laughed at that.

Trying to ignore them he unfolded the paper and quickly read it. "You have got to be kidding me." He sent his girlfriend a baleful look. She

was just beaming a smile back.

"What does it say?" Asuma asked. Shikamaru handed the sheet over to him reading it Asuma looked up in surprise. "A military observer?"

Temari nodded. "That's right. Part of my duties will include observing the forces of Konoha in action and sending my reports back to my government. Your Hokage has been kind enough to permit me to accompany any mission below S-rank."

"But what happens if you get hurt or even killed?" Asuma asked.

"No need to worry about that!" She said cheerfully. "Gaara sent a letter stating that he would not hold it against Konoha if anything happened to me while on duty."

"I don't suppose you'll be *observing* any other squads will you?" Shikamaru asked dryly.

"Worried someone else will steal me away from you?" She teased.

"No." He said bluntly.

"Since you have permission from the Hokage you can come with us. But the safety of the entire team depends on everyone working together. In a combat situation I expect you to follow my orders. Otherwise whether you have permission or not I will not let you join the mission." Asuma stated.

"No problem!" Temari chirped.

As they got moving Asuma wondered if she would be a liability in a combat situation.

738

The back draft finally let up and they were able to breathe again. Opening their eyes they saw Temari standing there with a look of

pure exultation. They could also see a few square miles of forest had been flattened. At that moment, she turned around. She gave all of them one of her huge eye closing smiles.

"How was that?" She asked.

Asuma and Chouji were both speechless. Feeling oddly proud of his ridiculously strong girlfriend Shikamaru smirked. "She also makes the world's best steak."

730

"Happy birthday Shikamaru." She gave him a long and very warm kiss. She had insisted on giving him her present in private. So while everyone else was downstairs enjoying the party they were in her room. After her kiss she handed him the large wrapped gift.

He opened it carefully. "Is this..." he looked at her not believing it.

She nodded happily. "It's the Kazekage's old shogi set, a true one of a kind piece."

"Temari this is too much I can't accept this."

"Gee that's too bad since Gaara wanted you to have it as well. I guess I'll have to write and tell him how you insulted him by refusing his gift."

"On second thought, how can I say no? Thanks Temari this is a great gift."

She smiled. "I'm very glad you like it."

Grinning he leaned in close to her. "You know Temari I think that as a fourteen year old I could probably handle *anything* a fifteen year old could."

"Really?" She leaned in to whisper in his ear. "I can think of *one* thing that you can't." She nimbly danced away from him and opened her door. Now let's get back to the party I feel like dancing with you birthday boy."

723

"Hey Temari! Hey Shikamaru!"

"Hey Ino." Shikamaru greeted.

"Hey. Temari said.

"Have you met Digo? He's my boyfriend!"

Temari smiled. "Well that's wonderful."

Ino nodded happily. "I know, it's so amazing when you find the right person for you!" She gave put her arm around the arm of her current boyfriend. "Come on, you can take me clothes shopping."

They watched as Ino dragged him in the direction of the shoe stores. "Well I was right he lasted a month."

Shikamaru shrugged. "Twenty nine days actually."

"Close enough, I bet this guy doesn't even last that long."

"I think he'll last that long, he seems all right."

Temari gave him a sweet smile. "Care to bet?"

"No." he said flatly. "I know better than to bet with you. Knowing you if I lose I'll end up dying my hair blonde and putting it in four ponytails."

She continued to smile. "What are you complaining about? That would be an improvement." Seeing him not rise to the bait she tried

something else. "O.k. no crazy bets, how about we just bet fifty ryu on how long she's with her current guy. I say he won't last more than twenty eight days." She held out her hand.

"Just 50 ryu?"

"Just the cash." She confirmed.

He shook her hand. "It's a bet."

704

She suddenly pulled away from him.

"What? What is it?" Shikamaru asked.

"It's back." She pointed to the large buck that had returned once again. "I don't think we can come here to make out anymore."

Knowing she was serious he decided not to argue with her. "All right, we can go back to one of our rooms." He said.

Temari shook her head. "If we do that your mom *will* end up walking in on us."

"We could get a hotel room."

"If we do that everyone will think we're having sex." A huge grin flowered on his face. "No Shikamaru."

"Fine we can find a nice quiet club or restaurant somewhere."

"You want to paw at me in *public* ?"

"Well there are some quiet spots in the park."

"You want to make out in the bushes while *children* are playing nearby?"

"Fine troublesome woman! Where do *you* want us to go?"

She opened her mouth to answer but couldn't think of a place. She sent a look back down to the base of the hill. The large buck was calmly chewing the grass. She looked back at Shikamaru.

"Oh the hell with it." She pushed him back down and got back to making out with him.

696

As look would have it Ino ran into not just Temari and Shikamaru but Chouji and Irmana as well. She put her arms around the rather handsome solemn dark haired boy and made a show of putting her head on his shoulder. "This my new boyfriend Zabrum he is just my kind!" She gave him a kiss on his cheek. "I like my men dark and mysterious."

Temari laughed and gave Shikamaru a kiss on the cheek as well. "I like mine smart and lazy."

Irmana stepped in front of Chouji, put her arms around him and gave him long sweet kiss on his lips. When she was done Chouji was a looking a little flushed. Irmana turned a bit so she could look directly at Ino. "I like mine to be sweet and kind."

Ino's smile seemed to crack a bit but she kept it in place. "That's great, really, really, great, I mean really." She grabbed her boyfriends arm and began to roughly drag him away. "Come on you're buying me a really nice dinner."

Shikamaru shook his at the painful scene. He pulled out a fifty ryu note. "Here."

Temari grinned as she accepted it. "Thank you very much. Want to go again?"

He thought about it a moment. "All right, I say the Sasuke clone lasts twenty eight days."

Temari nodded. "Fine then I'll take twenty nine. Same terms?"

"Sure, why not."

"What are you two up to?" Chouji asked.

"We're betting on how long Ino stays with her boyfriend." Shikamaru explained.

"You two are actually betting on how long it will take Ino to break up with this guy?" Irmana asked.

"That's right." Temari confirmed.

"How much are you betting?"

"Just fifty ryu."

Irmana nodded. "Put me down for twenty five days."

651

"Checkmate." She said happily.

Her opponent looked at her. "I do not believe this." He said.

"I've beaten you three games in a row. Have you had enough?" Temari asked.

Asuma slowly nodded. "Am I really this bad at shogi? Everyone who lives in this house beats me."

"Well I guess you could try Yoshino she doesn't really play much."

TWENTY MINUTES LATER

"Checkmate." Yoshino said.

Asuma buried his head in his hands and began to cry.

610

Temari went over to him and confidently put a hand down on his shoulder. He did not disappear in a puff of smoke. "Ha! I did it! I finally got it on one try."

Shikaku nodded and happily dispelled all the bushins. "Congratulations Temari you have greatly refined your chakra sensing skills and have finally mastered this training game."

She smiled so wide she closed her eyes. She was *very* happy to *finally* be done playing that stupid game. "Thanks dad!"

Shikaku nodded happily. "Now we can start level two training games."

Her smile slipped. "Level two?"

"That's right."

"Uhm, how many levels are there?"

"Six." Her face fell. "Don't be depressed daughter you really are doing great! In another three or four years you will be as good as stealth as Shikamaru without shadow jutsus."

She tried to smile even though she didn't feel like it. "How long until as good as you?"

He smiled at her but didn't answer no reason to *really* depress her.

598

"Hey guys meet my new boyfriend, Katon." Ino said.

"Pleased to meet you." Shikamaru said.

"You're one lucky guy." Temari said.

"Come on, you can talk me clothes shopping."

As soon as they were out of hearing Temari turned to him anxiously.
"Well?"

He calmly pulled out a notebook. Flipping through it he found what he wanted. "Ah, Kakashi won the pool this month."

"Damn, well come on let's call everyone so we can set up a new one." Temari said.

476

They were slow dancing at the Twilight club.

He whispered in her ear. "Happy year and a half anniversary."

She smiled. "Happy anniversary."

411

Ino poured healing chakra into her as Asuma, Chouji, and Shikamaru all watched.

"Ino is she..." Shikamaru couldn't get the words out as they stuck in his throat.

Ino turned her face up, it was streaked in mud and she was tired but she had a small grin. "She's going to be just fine; none of her vital points were hit."

Temari grinned even though she felt as though she'd been run over.
"Hey lazy you should know how tough I am by now."

He knelt down beside her and took her hand in his. "No more coming with us on missions. It's just too dangerous."

"Oh are you retiring then?" She kept going. "We're shinobi; we know the chances we take."

"Damn it Temari you almost died!"

"That still leaves me two behind you then in near death experiences."

"Temari if I ever lost you I would lose everything."

"I know," she said quietly. "I felt the exact same way when you almost died in Suna. I wanted to never see you again because I couldn't bear the thought of losing you. Remember what you said to me? You said that nothing for us was ever guaranteed, that we never knew how much time we had. You only knew that you wanted to spend that time with me. I know exactly what you feel right now because that's what I felt that night in the hospital. Don't feel guilty, this wasn't your fault, I'm ninja this is the price I pay for walking that path. Walk it with me Shikamaru for however long we both can." She smiled and with her other hand she reached up and wiped the tears from his cheeks.

"I love you so much Temari."

"And I love you Shikamaru."

Having done what she could Ino sat nearby but tried to give them some privacy. Shikamaru was kneeling next to her. He held her hand with one and with the other hand he gently touched her face. He was talking to her. She had no idea what was being said but she was sure the words were tender and comforting. They loved each other

so much. It was so obvious whenever they were together, but especially now. And seeing the two of them she felt herself drowning in misery. She didn't understand why, but looking at them only drove home how alone and miserable she felt. *Why doesn't anyone love me?*

Chouji came over and sat next to her. "Ino what's wrong? Temari's going to be all right isn't she?"

Ino nodded. "She... she sure is." Why did her voice sound scratchy? Why was she embarrassing herself?

"Then why are you crying?" He said gently. Chouji was always gentle.

"No reason, just hormones I guess, maybe stress." She turned to him. "Chouji would you hold me?"

"What?" He asked nervously.

"Please just hold me for a little while Chouji."

"All, all right." He carefully put his arms around her.

She shut her eyes and pressed herself against his warm body. The feel of his arms around her seemed to make everything better. As long as he held her everything was all right. Because when he was with her she never felt unloved. She took a long shuddering breath and thought she would be all right as long as she could stay like this.

"Chouji can we stay like this for a while?"

She felt him hold her just a little tighter. "Sure Ino, for as long as you want."

"Promise Chouji-kun?"

"Yes, Ino-chan, I promise."

Asuma stood back. He wondered why it was that two people could admit the truth to one another and two couldn't.

380

"I don't know about this." Hinata said. "This isn't what I usually wear."

"Don't you want to get Naruto's attention when he comes back?" Temari asked.

"But Naruto-kun's my boyfriend. I already have his attention." She said defensively.

"Sure Hinata," Ino said. "He notices you as a cute little *girl*. Wouldn't you like him to see you as a sexy *woman*?"

"Sexy?" Hinata said nervously.

"Hinata men are simpleminded creatures." Temari explained.

"Hey!" Shikamaru objected.

"They *never* figure anything out unless you hit them over the head with it." Temari concluded.

"Right! Hinata you're turning into a beautiful woman but Naruto will never notice if you don't show him." Ino said.

"But Naruto-kun won't even be back in the village for months. Why do I need to wear these now?"

"To get used to them of course." Ino said. "If you start wearing them now then by the time he comes back it'll be the norm."

"I don't know." Hinata looked at herself in the full length mirror. She was wearing navy blue shorts that came half way down her thigh. As well as a white button down short sleeve shirt that was two sizes too small. She had just gone through a recent growth spurt. The too tight

shirt showed off the results of that. She didn't think she looked bad, but she looked different. Would Naruto-kun really like this?

"Shikamaru what do you think?" Temari asked.

"Hmmm, I'm not sure." He grinned at her. "Any chance *you* could model it for me?"

"I'll take them." Hinata said.

364

"So are you both still virgins?" She asked blandly.

Instantly they were spitting up tea and trying not to choke. Yoshino sent her husband a tiny grin. This was going to be fun.

"What?!" Temari managed to gasp out.

"Well dear I just presumed the reason the two of you came home so late was because you were having sex in that hotel suite you booked last month."

Temari could feel her face turning red and she could only stare back at the woman. Meanwhile Inner Temari was in a fetal position rocking back and forth crying, ***Go to my happy place. Go to my happy place. Go to my happy place.***

Yoshino reached out and gently put her hand on Temari's. "It's all right dear I'm not upset. I never expected you to be able to hold out until your wedding night. I'm glad you waited as long as you did. Why I can still remember the night Shikaku gave me his Nara's heart and told me he loved only me. We couldn't get back to my apartment fast enough."

" Mom!! I'm begging you to stop! You are killing the last remnants of my childhood innocence!" Shikamaru cried out.

Ignoring her son's outburst she focused again on Temari. "So tell me dear, is my son a tender and considerate lover like his father?"

Temari could feel her jaw trying to drop to the floor. Inner Temari cried out, **Nooooooooo**. And ran away.

Shikamaru jumped to his feet and ran for the back door. "Excuse me I'm going to see if the Hokage has any suicide missions available."

"I'll come with you!" Temari ran after him as fast as her legs could get her there.

When they were both gone Shikaku turned to his wife. "You're terrible."

She shrugged. "I'm a mother, it's what mothers do. Now finish your breakfast dear or it'll get cold."

362

He shut the door to the suite and wasted no time in putting his hands all over her. After that mind numbingly horrible breakfast they had both agreed they would not even try and pretend they were not having sex. They would however not do anything at home.

"Have I told you what a great idea it was to rent this place?" He said.

"Having a rich girlfriend has its advantages huh?" Her kimono was already on the floor as were his Jonin vest and jacket.

"Definitely." He was half leading and half pushing her to the bedroom.

"One thing though."

"Yeah?"

"If another deer shows up here to spy on us I'm leaving you."

Nothing could be easier

Author's Note: Thanks to everyone for such a tremendous response to this story! I just wanted to let everyone know that the numbers represent the countdown until the big day. From some of the reviews there seemed to be some confusion about that.

"Well now that we've gotten *that* out of the way." Tsunade said trying to pretend the revelation had never occurred to her. "You three will be a team once again. Unfortunately I don't know just what you are capable of. Naruto and Sakura you have just completed long apprenticeships under myself and Jiraiya. Neither of you has been on a real mission since you were both Genin. Sasuke, your taijutsu and physical endurance have markedly improved though you are not the equal of Lee in that department. Having had your chakra sealed for so long though it will take you some time to fully regain your ninjutsu abilities."

"How long?" Sasuke asked worriedly.

"No more than one or two weeks." Jiraiya assured but then frowned. "But then there's the sharingan."

"What about the sharingan?" Sasuke didn't like where this conversation seemed to be heading.

Jiraiya looked at Tsunade. "Mind if I do an experiment?"

"Are you sure it's safe?" Tsunade cautioned.

"Of course, he won't be in danger of anything more severe than a headache."

Tsunade slowly nodded. "All right then."

"Sasuke try and activate your sharingan." Jiraiya said.

Sasuke shut his eyes and channeled a bit of chakra to his eyes. To his surprise he didn't feel the old familiar warmth flood into his eyes. Instead it felt as though his chakra flow were stopped in the middle of his brain behind his eyes. Grunting he channeled more chakra and tried to force it forward past the, 'blockage.' As he did so he could feel pressure continue to build. What was wrong? He pushed more chakra and tried again to activate his bloodline. The pressure in his head built and began to throb, but he could feel the blockage start to give way.

"Sasuke stop!" Tsunade shouted.

He opened his eyes feeling annoyed. "Why I can..." As he spoke he tasted blood. Putting his hand over his mouth he felt blood flowing out of his nose.

"Release your chakra and sit down Sasuke-kun!" Sakura was at his side and so was Naruto.

"I'm fine." He released the chakra but the feeling of a throbbing pressure in his head didn't go away. With his hand he covered his nose to slow the blood flow. "What is wrong with me?" Though he didn't like it he let Sakura and the dobe put him in a chair. Sakura swiftly and gently touched his face as she worked a medical jutsu.

Tsunade sent Jiraiya an annoyed look. "Just a headache huh?"

Jiraiya sent her back a disgruntled look of his own. "When I was here last time you asked me to do something that had never been done before. Create a seal that could suppress the sharingan. No one had ever even thought how that might be done. I had to *invent* something completely new. And by the way, at the time you didn't mention anything about being able to remove it; you wanted just the opposite in fact. I was able to remove it along with the rest of the seal, but even I can't know what the complications might be."

Having finished healing him his nose had stopped bleeding but his head still throbbed. As he took a piece of cloth to clean up he gave

her a polite nod. "Thank you Sakura."

She smiled gently. "You're welcome Sasuke-kun."

Sasuke shifted his focus from her to Jiraiya. "What are you saying that you've ruined the sharingan?" He was trying to keep panic from his voice, but the feeling was rising in him.

"I didn't say that." Jiraiya said.

"Then when will I be able to activate it again?"

"I'm sorry Sasuke but I just don't know. We'll just have to wait and see how it goes." Jiraiya admitted.

"Wait? I've already waited almost two years and a half! How much longer do you expect me to wait?" Sasuke growled feeling his temper beginning to rise.

"You'll wait however long it takes Genin." Tsunade said sharply. "You seem to have suddenly forgotten you're here to obey your superiors not give them orders."

Sasuke looked down on the floor. He couldn't let the frustration consume him. "I apologize Hokage-sama."

"Believe me when I say we want to help you get to full strength as soon as possible. But whether you like it or not it may take some time." Tsunade shook her head. "I had been planning to give the three of you a special test against Kakashi tonight, but I think that will have to wait. The three of you are dismissed for the rest of the day. I want you back here tomorrow morning at seven a.m. to meet your client for your first mission."

"We've got a mission tomorrow!" Naruto sang out.

"Don't get too excited it's only a two day C-rank. I'm assigning it to you because the client asked for you specifically."

"C- rank! Baachan there is no way I am wasting my time and talent with a C-rank I want a... hmph!!"

Naruto was cut off by Sakura slapping a hand over his mouth.
"Please ignore him LadyTsunade. I am sure he's lightheaded from hunger and the excitement of being back home." *Shut up Naruto! You have no idea how scary she can be when she gets angry!!*

Tsunade frowned but nodded. "Fine then, you are dismissed until seven tomorrow morning."

Not letting go of her hold on him she dragged Naruto out. Sasuke got up put his hands in his pockets and slouched away.

"Kakashi please stay a moment, there is something Jiraiya wants to share with you."

"Oh?" Kakashi eyed the Toad Sage.

Jiraiya nodded seriously. "That's right, it's about Naruto."

Temari was sitting at the kitchen table humming a happy tune as she folded the invitations and slid them into small envelopes. Shikamaru came in through the back door and quickly sat down next to her. He eyed his cheerful blonde girlfriend cautiously.

"Why are you in such a good mood doing such a mind numbing task?"

She leaned over to give him a quick kiss as he sat down. "Two reasons, the main one is that I'm excited that in a few more days I can *finally* tell everyone I'm getting married. After Gaara announces our engagement I can put these in the mail and start *really* planning our wedding. As it is a little more than three months isn't much time to get everything organized."

"I'm sure you and my mom will have everything exactly as you want it in no time."

"Oh I'm sure we will, but it won't be easy."

"So what's the other reason you're in such a good mood?"
Shikamaru asked.

She gave him a sweet smile as she handed him a stack of invitations and envelopes. "The other reason is that I have you here to help me of course."

"Of course." He began folding and stuffing.

"Oh I can't wait! It has been sooo long since I had Ichiraku ramen!"
Naruto said happily. He looked at his two teammates. "Hey lets all eat together! It'll be like the good old days."

"Are you treating?" Sakura asked.

Anxiously he pulled out Gama-chan. His poor wallet had been in better health. "Uhm, I can't really afford it right now."

"In that case I'm not getting ramen."

"Ah come on Sakura-chan!"

"Nope!" She began to walk off.

"I'll eat with you dobe."

Sakura froze and looked back over her shoulder. She'd invited Sasuke out to eat or get tea or just hang out a hundred times! Always the answer was the same bored and apathetic no. Now Naruto just asks, and doesn't even offer to pay, and Sasuke actually agrees?! *Don't tell me he actually prefers Naruto's company to mine!*

Naruto had a huge smile on his face. "You mean it teme?"

Sasuke shrugged. "I haven't had ramen in awhile and I guess I can put up with you for an hour."

"Hah! Well come on let's go. We'll see you tomorrow Sakura-chan." The two of them walked past her as she stood there in the middle of the street. She stood there mute watching them go as pride fought with her desire to be near *him*.

"WAIT!"

The two boys came to a halt and turned around. "What is it Sakura-chan?" Naruto asked as she ran to catch up to them.

"I've changed my mind. I'm suddenly in the mood for ramen." Pride never stood a chance.

"Really? That's great!" Naruto said.

Sasuke gave her a knowing smirk. "What a surprise."

"May I join you Gaara-sensei?"

Gaara nodded and she carefully sat down on the branch next to him. "You should get some rest; tomorrow will be another long day of travel."

"Thank you for your concern for me but I'm fine." Matsuri said. "It doesn't seem right for the Kazekage to stand guard alone all night."

Gaara had a slight smile. He was not, and probably never would be, what anyone would call emotionally open. But after spending time with Naruto he had become just a bit more willing to smile a little. He even laughed once in a blue moon! "As I do not sleep there is no reason for anyone else to perform this duty."

"I just wanted to thank you again for all the kindness you have shown me. I know how hard it is for you to find time to train me and I

know I am only here because you want me to see the Leaf village. You are truly most kind." She put her hand down and touched his. He carefully pulled his hand away.

"You are very welcome Matsuri. Do not underestimate what a fine ninja you have become. You would not be here now if you were not." He looked at her and she could see kindness there in his eyes.

People all thought he was cold by nature. But she had seen glimpses of his warmth.

829

Matsuri carefully approached the newly appointed Kazekage. Despite the bitter cold the festival grounds were filled with revelers and dancers. Coronations were rare events and people felt almost an obligation to celebrate. Looking at the dancers she could see Jiraiya dancing with a rather buxom blonde woman. Being both Sanin and the Kazekage's personal guest he had a long line of women eager to dance with him and the fellow didn't mind sharing himself. In some ways she suspected he was even worse than Kankuro. She spotted Naruto dancing with Temari again. Now Naruto was a sweet boy, loud and boisterous but with a good heart. He and Gaara had become quite close and was the only person she had ever heard him call 'friend.' Some of his habits were also very endearing. He had told everyone he was in love with a Leaf kunoichi named Hinata. At the dance he'd asked Temari if it would be all right for him to dance with other girls. Temari had told him it was but only with her and a few others that she trusted not to try and take advantage of the poor boy. Matsuri had been one of those trusted few and had enjoyed dancing with such a sweet and faithful boy.

When she stood before Gaara she bowed to him. "May I offer my congratulations Kazekage-sama?"

He nodded in acknowledgement and gave her a tiny grin. "Please do not call me that Matsuri. I would like you to continue to call me

sensei."

"As you wish Gaara-sensei. I've noticed you haven't danced at all tonight."

"I have been asked but I have declined all the requests."

"Can I ask why?"

The grin slipped away. "Because everyone who has asked me has been afraid of me."

"I see." She paused. *Should I?* "Gaara-sensei, I realize I am only a commoner but... I am not afraid of you. And I would really like a dance."

He looked at her for a moment considering. Finally spoke in a low voice just for her. "If I were to dance with you only Matsuri people would begin to say that we are lovers." Hearing that from him her heart beat picked up and she blushed. "Do you still wish to dance?"

She knew the correct answer would be no. Apprentice or not a common girl like her had no business being associated with the Kazekage in *that* way. Even if it was just rumor. Her head told her to say no, but her heart gave her a different answer. "Yes."

"Very well." He had reached out and calmly taken her hand into his and led them out onto the dance floor. The moment they began to move together the whispers started. They shared three dances, none of them slow ones, Gaara was graceful on the dance floor and had been utterly proper. They did nothing that even hinted at impropriety. But the next day everyone was talking about her as being his lover. It made her ears burn but she was still glad to have danced with him.

At all the festivals she was the only one. He danced with her and her alone. She loved those moments. She loved them because for just those short times she could touch him. His hand would enclose hers

and they seemed to share... something. Whatever people thought she and Gaara were nothing more than sensei and student. They had never kissed, and away from the dance floor they rarely even touched. The fact that they were not more was his choice not hers. She loved him.

"I am not tired at all, may I stay up with you for awhile?"

He smiled and nodded. And so she sat on the branch with him her hands near but not touching his. She had never told him what she felt for him. Gaara had trouble with emotions and she would not trouble him with what she felt. She supposed she was a very foolish girl. Being in love with a man who was so completely out of her class and who didn't know how to express whatever he did feel.

Looking at him she sighed. It was foolish, but she was still happy to just be near him.

"Hey old man! Can we get some ramen for the brand new and amazing team Kakashi?" Sasuke smirked at his antics while Sakura shook her head feeling embarrassed.

Teuchi looked up from his stove. He took a moment. "Naruto? Hey Naruto you've finally come back!"

Smiling happily he scratched the back of his head. "Yeah I'm back."

"And you are with your friends I see." The old cook said happily. "All of you sit down and order whatever you like. In honor of Naruto's return your meal is on me."

"No," a voice said from just outside the restaurant. "It is on me tonight." The man entered past the red curtain.

"Iruka-sensei! I'm really happy to see you!"

The scarred ninja smiled. "I am very happy to see you as well Naruto and want to hear all about your journey."

"That might take awhile, there's a lot to tell." Naruto said happily.

They all sat down. Naruto had Iruka to one side and Sasuke on the other. Sakura was sitting next to Sasuke. Teuchi promised a bowl of extra special ramen just for him. He had set it and the rest of the orders down and Naruto was about to dig in when a pair of arms wrapped themselves around his neck.

"Gah!" He nearly jumped up knocking over his bowl.

He heard a very feminine giggle from behind him. "I'm sorry Naruto-kun, but may I join you?"

Twisting around on the stool he saw it was Hinata. "Of course! How did you know where to find me Hinata-chan?"

Without a word Iruka moved over to the next stool to allow Hinata to sit next to him. Sitting down she smiled serenely at her boyfriend. "Naruto-kun it wasn't hard to figure out where you'd want to eat your first night back."

"Hey old man can we get some more ramen for the most beautiful kunoichi in the village?"

Sakura watched the way Hinata was looking at him and the way he was looking at her. *It's so obvious they love each other and are happy together.* She looked at the boy sitting next to her. As usual he was ignoring her. *Why can't we be like that?*

"So dobe you going to tell us about your trip or what?"

"Yes Naruto-kun! I read all your letters and post cards but I want to hear the details!" Hinata said.

"Well the best part of the whole trip was the two months I got to stay at Gaara's mansion. It was great! He hired this chef who specialized

in making ramen! I got to eat it whenever I wanted! Then there was..."

Iruka smiled fondly at his former student. *Trust Naruto to begin his story with food.*

Naruto ate and spoke with his usual enthusiasm. Some of the events he related were quite outrageous; especially the ones centered on Jiraiya's, 'research.' They all stayed there for over two hours listening. Even Sasuke stayed though he managed to make a few comments questioning some of the events. Finally when the meal was over they all went their separate ways. Naruto walked Hinata home. They both had missions tomorrow but they were sure they would have more time together soon. With a quick good night kiss he watched the girl he loved hurry into the Hyuga complex. Smiling and feeling like he was walking on air Naruto headed home. He had spent a lot of nights imagining what his first day back home would be like. Amazingly the reality had turned out better than any dream.

"Is it really that serious?" Kakashi looked at the suppression seal Jiraiya had given him.

"It is." Jiraiya confirmed. "Naruto has grown much more powerful, but I'm afraid his control over the fox's chakra weakens whenever he becomes too emotional. If the worst comes to worst you can use that seal to suppress his red chakra. But remember this..." Jiraiya frowned and tried to drive home the seriousness of what he was about to say. "Whatever happens you *must* prevent him from reaching the four tail state. At that point I am afraid he will begin to lose his personality and may be overwhelmed by the Kyuubi's."

"What should I do if he does reach that state?"

"Run." Jiraiya answered simply. "At that point he'll be too powerful for you to have any effect on and he'll no longer be the Naruto we know."

Frowning he put the seal away. "Do you have any idea why Akatsuki has been so active lately? They've been keeping a low profile for a long time now. What has changed?"

"I have no idea. Now that I've returned Naruto to your care I'll be leaving again to see what I can find out. One thing is certain though. They still want what Naruto has inside of him. No matter where he is Akatsuki will remain a danger to him."

"I know." Kakashi said sadly. "I'll watch out for him and I'm sure Naruto is much stronger than he used to be."

"He is, but whether or not he is a match for the likes of Uchiha Itachi is another matter."

Kakashi shook his head and wondered what the future held in store.

107

The next morning team Kakashi was waiting outside the Hokage's office.

"There is something I need to tell of you." Kakshi said.

"What is it sensei?" Sakura asked.

He looked them all over carefully. "Though I am your leader again you are no longer my students. From now on we are all equals. We are all shinobi of the Leaf." The three younger ninjas took his words to heart and seemed to stand just a bit taller. It was a somber and important moment for all of them.

"Oh hey! I just remembered, I brought you a present Kakashi-sensei." Naruto began digging through a pouch.

"Naruto I appreciate it but we're about to meet with the Hokage now is not the time for..." Kakshi gasped as Naruto held out his gift. It

was an orange covered book with, 'Icha Icha Tactics,' on the cover. "Is that... is that..." He reached for it as if afraid it might disappear at his touch. But when he took hold of it, it was real enough.

"The first new novel in over three years. This copy is autographed by the way. It's still unpublished so I know you'll appreciate getting it. Actually I think this might be ero-sennin's best work yet. Especially when Tako visit's the girls' dormitory and..."

"Naruto!" Kakashi said sharply. "Don't spoil it for me."

"Oops, sorry."

"You've read that." Sakura said her voice dripping venom.

Naruto smiled unashamedly. "I sure did and all the other books in the series too!"

Sakura began to crack her knuckles. *Great he 's come back even more of a pervert than when he left!*

Opening the cover Kakashi let out a sigh of sheer bliss. "Naruto have I ever told you you're my favorite?" Sakura and Sasuke both sweat dropped.

The door to the Hokage's office opened and she stepped out. "All right it's time to meet your client and... Kakashi what is that?"

The book quickly disappeared. "Oh nothing Hokage-sama."

Tsunade frowned at him. "I had better not find out you are corrupting these poor children."

"Please believe me Hokage-sama that there is no way I could ever do that!" Kakashi said.

"Especially not to Naruto." Sasuke put in.

With a sharp look Tsunade turned back to her office. "All right well come in." They all followed her into the office. There they spotted Temari and Shikamaru.

"Hey," Naruto greeted. "Are you two getting a mission today too?"

Temari smiled. "Well lazy here is but not me. I'm your client."

Tsunade nodded. "Ambassador Temari is going to meet her brother and accompany him on the last leg of his journey. She requested Shikamaru and your team to accompany her."

"Actually I just thought Gaara would like seeing you again Naruto."

"Cool! I get to see Gaara and see how he has been."

Tsunade nodded. "This should be a nice simple mission to help all of you get used to working together again. All you have to do is meet Gaara's party and then just escort them the rest of the way here. Nothing could be easier."

Late in the day Gaara again checked his radio communicator. The range was only five miles but once she was close he would tell her exactly where he was. He looked over to the person who was leaping beside him. "It will be good to see Temari again."

Kankuro nodded. "What do you want to bet she brings the lazy one with her?"

"You don't like Shikamaru?"

Kankuro shrugged. "He's all right as long as he makes her happy I suppose. I just don't think he's good enough for her that's all."

"I think they are a very good match." Gaara said simply.

Kankuro smiled. "Like you and Matsuri?"

Gaara sighed. "She and I are not lovers; she is my student nothing more."

"Sure."

Gaara did not bother saying anything further. Like most of Suna Kankuro was convinced that he and Matsuri were more than they were. He took a quick look back where she and Captain Yura were following. He was quite fond of her, and when she was close he felt... something. But even if he were interested in something more it would not be proper for him to act on it while he was her sensei.

"I'm looking forward to seeing her, it's kind of boring just the four of us. You should have brought more people. You're the Kazekage you rate a big entourage."

"I prefer to keep things simple whenever possible. And given my own abilities I do not need a large escort."

"Yeah I don't think anyone would be stupid enough to attack you." As they entered a large open clearing he saw two figures seemingly waiting for them. "What the hell?"

Gaara raised a closed fist and the four of them came to a halt in the open field. Gaara eyed the two figures standing about a hundred feet away. They both wore pointed straw hats and large billowing robes that were black with red clouds. "I recognize your dress from reports I have read. You are both Akatsuki are you not?" Upon hearing that Kankuro immediately pulled out his scrolls, Matsuri took out a pair of bolas and began spinning them; Captain Yura took out a single kunai.

"Oh yeah we sure are." One of them answered. He pulled off his hat to reveal a mane of long blonde hair.

"You are Sabaku no Gaara the Kazekage and possessor of the Shukaku one tail demon." The other one spoke. He was much blockier but shorter than the first. His voice was low and harsh. "To

retrieve the Shukaku is the highest command given unto us by the Akatsuki."

"Yeah! So if you wouldn't mind just coming with us we wouldn't have to hurt anyone else." The blonde one said.

Uncorking his gourd the sand flowed out and around him. "I cannot do that." Gaara replied calmly.

"Yeah, I didn't think you would but I just thought I'd ask." He stuck both hands into a pair of pouches.

"Let's get on with this." His partner said. "I hate waiting."

Give you what you want

107

"This is so great!" Naruto said yet again as they were flying through the woods.

"Naruto enough already!" Sakura spoke out in annoyance. "You're excited to be going on a mission again. We get it! You don't have to keep telling us."

"Ah come on Sakura-chan!" Naruto pouted. "It's been so long since we were all together. I'm just happy about it."

"So am I! But you don't hear me telling you about it every five minutes. Right Sasuke?"

"Let Naruto be excited, it has been awhile." Sakura gawked at him not believing it. Sasuke maintained his dispassionate appearance but the truth was he was happier than he had been in a long while. In the past two years neither he nor Sakura had gone out on any missions. For Sakura it had been a matter of choice. First her KMC training and then her apprenticeship under Tsunade had kept her in the village. Sasuke had remained in Konoha as well, but not by choice. When team Guy was home he had trained with him and with Lee. Sakura would often show up to watch and see him sweat and struggle to keep up the pace those two maniacs set. After more than two years of weight training, endurance running, and murderous sparring matches his taijutsu was infinitely better than it had been. But using taijutsu alone he was still no match for Lee, never mind Guy. Though Sakura knew of course that he was not shinobi the harsh reality tended to become obscured in her mind as she saw him train like one day in and day out. Seeing him so regularly she had let herself forget that unlike her Sasuke was a prisoner on a tenuous probation.

Though he refused to show it Sasuke was very happy to be a ninja going on a mission again. He was even sort of happy to be listening to Naruto's ridiculous banter. When Sakura looked away he let a small smile appear. After so long without his freedom he was going to let himself enjoy it. *At least for now.*

Deidara pulled his hands out of his pouches. From the mouths within his palms chewed up clay was exuded. In each palm the clay was transformed into three falcons. "Yeah, I'm an artist. Let me show you that art is a bang. Tossing the six miniature falcons into the air they expanded into life size and flew quickly and directly at Gaara. Gaara stood calmly where he was. Just as the falcons arrived the sand rose up to surround him. Deidara made a hand gesture in front of his face. "Bang!" All six falcons exploded. For a moment the place Gaara had stood was consumed in fire and smoke.

"Gaara-sensei!" Matsuri shouted.

"Relax Matsuri, you should know by now that something so simple wouldn't touch Gaara." Kankuro said smugly. He had already summoned his three puppets.

The smoke cleared to reveal Gaara standing in the exact same spot surrounded by sand. "Such an attack is useless against me." He spoke blandly.

Deidara thought, *So that is Gaara's ultimate defense eh? Definitely interesting, he seems to have taken the force of the blow with no problem. Wonder just how much force that sand can absorb.*

His partner had also carefully observed what had happened. "You seem well prepared to fend off a direct assault. Let us try something else then shall we?"

Without warning Captain Yura grabbed Matsuri from behind and placed a kunai to her throat.

"Captain!" Matsuri shouted.

"What the hell are you doing?" Kankuro yelled.

"I am very sorry but I am in the service of my master Sasori."

"Sasori of the red sands?" Kankuro said in disbelief.

Low laughter rumbled from the blocky Akatsuki. "I am honored to still be remembered. We know the girl is precious to you, if you surrender to us she will not be harmed."

Gaara slowly turned from his opponents to Matsuri and Yura. As he did so he casually formed a few hand signs. "You are a traitor Captain Yura." He said calmly.

Seeing his back turned Deidara smiled. He made several more falcons. These he made with his more powerful C-2 explosive clay. *Yeah! Now while his back is turned.* He let them fly at top speed. As before when they neared their target the sand formed a protective sphere around Gaara. An even bigger explosion rocked the clearing. Taking advantage of the momentary distraction Gaara had sand rise up from beneath Yura's feet. The sand took hold of both his arms and chest. Matsuri leapt away.

"Sand Coffin." Gaara had the sand cover Yura completely. "Traitor." The word was a death sentence. "Exploding Sand Funeral." With a loud burst Yura's life ended in a geyser of blood.

Interesting, Deidara thought, *the sand acted independently to protect him even though he couldn't see what was coming. And again it looks like he did so at no cost to himself.* Further speculation was cut off as Deidara was forced to leap back to avoid a rain of kunai.

"All right you bastard! You can deal with me now." Kankuro sent Karasu in directly to attack while Kuroari went circling around.

"Deidara, get into the air I will deal with this." Sasori said.

"Very well master Sasori." With his clay he created an owl and expanded it to the size of a steed. Jumping on it took a few flaps of its wings and was soon airborne.

"Where do you think you're going?" Kankuro said as he had Karasu into the air.

But the puppet was immediately swatted away by a huge metal tail from Sasori's body. "My partner is no longer your concern. *I* am your opponent."

As Kankuro pulled Karasu back Deidara circled up above. "Kankuro I will deal with the other one. Matsuri cover Kankuro. Both of you be careful." Riding a cloud of sand he rose into the air.

Deidara was immediately impressed by Gaara's speed. *Oh yeah! This is definitely going to be interesting. Let's crank things up a notch. I'll use C -3 from multiple angles.* Shoving both hands back into pouches he got busy.

Meanwhile Kankuro was quickly running into trouble. All Karasu's attacks were easily blocked by the surprisingly fast metal tail. Sasori rumbled laughter. "I would enjoy playing with you awhile longer *puppet master* But you are not my concern and so..." As Karasu went in for another attack the metal tail tore the puppet in half. Even as that happened Karasu charged from behind only to have the tail swing back and reduce a second puppet to kindling. Kankuro stood behind Sanshouo his last puppet. "This has been fun. Run away and you can tell everyone you survived a fight against Sasori of the red sands."

As the metal swung about over Sasori's head two bolos struck near the middle and wrapped themselves around it. Sasori swung his head over to where Matsuri stood. "So the girl wants to fight now? A word of advice girl, if you want to fight at least bring a real weapon and not some rocks connected with wire."

In response Matsuri merely smiled and brought a hand up before her face in the same gesture Deidara had used. "Kai!" The bolos exploded and tore the metal tail in half. A large hunk fell to the ground useless. The blunted remainder was pulled back.

"Heh, that was not a bad trick girl." Sasori launched himself in her direction. She leapt away and as she did so another metal tail lashed out at her. "Fortunately I keep a spare." The tail struck her in the side, cutting into her ribs and sending her flying back to the ground. She struck awkwardly and bounced several times before coming to halt. She did not move.

Kankuro got to her side quickly. Checking her pulse she was alive but unconscious. He didn't know how badly hurt she was. "You bastard!" Though Sanshouo was a defensive puppet he was all that Kankuro had left. He launched Sanshouo at Sasori. The tail shot out and struck the puppet's one hidden weak point breaking it into pieces. *How? How did he know all the weak points on my puppets?*

"You should have run." Sasori launched himself at Kankuro and the unconscious Matsuri.

The last of Deidara's clay hawks exploded and were gone. Despite his best efforts he had yet to even scratch his opponent. Now he was on the defensive as Gaara pursued him and sent arms of sand out to try and catch him. Deidara had already had a couple of close calls and only just evaded Gaara's reach. Gaara was faster, Deidara was more maneuverable and more experienced in flight. Still it was becoming clear to him that at this rate he would be caught sooner or later. Glancing down below he smiled.

"Looks like your friends aren't doing so well."

Gaara took a quick look down.

With Matsuri secure in his arms Kankuro leapt back. Sasori's metal tail lashed out, but was blocked by a wall of sand.

"Gaara!" Kankuro called out. "I'm afraid she's hurt."

"Is it serious?" In his voice was a rare bit of emotion.

"I don't know." Kankuro answered.

"Heh, you needn't worry about the girl. Even if she is alive all my weapons are coated with a special poison. She'll be dead within three days."

Gaara sent the man a look that Kankuro recognized, his hands tightened into fists, and the sand began to jump about in agitation. "Kankuro take Matsuri and get out of here. Find Temari and all of you get back to Konoha as fast as you can."

"Gaara I won't abandon you!"

"You don't have any puppets, you can't fight anymore. You and Matsuri escape that is an order from your Kazekage."

"But..."

Gaara glared at him and he shut his mouth. "I said go!"

"Yes Gaara." Kankuro leapt away with Matsuri. He had seen that look in Gaara's eyes many, many times before. As he fled the battle area he honestly wasn't sure if he was more afraid for Gaara or the two Akatsuki.

I want blood! A voice howled in his head. *So do I.* Gaara thought. With Kankuro and Matsuri safely out of the way he would not hold back. The voice began to laugh and scenes of past slaughter flashed into his mind.

"You say you want the Shukaku?" Gaara sent Sasori a huge and happy smile. Sasori was actually a bit impressed by the immensity of the killer intent facing him. "Then I'll give you what you want."

Temari's radio communicator began to beep. "Well it's about time." She switched it to receive. "This is Temari... oh hey Kankuro how..." Her facial expression froze. "WHAT?!" She shouted immediately getting everyone's attention. She listened for a few more minutes and the color seemed to drain out of her. "All right where are you now?" She listened for a moment. "All right keep coming and we should meet in just a couple of minutes. Don't worry we have a medic nin with us. Temari out."

"What happened?" Naruto asked before anyone else could.

"My brother's party was attacked by two Akatsuki."

"What?!" Naruto shouted. "We've got to go help! We've got to..."

"Naruto!" Kakashi's voice over rode his. "This situation is serious, we're going to come up with a plan of action not just rush in blind."

"But we have to help Gaara!" Naruto demanded.

"And we will." Kakashi assured him. "Our mission is to bring Gaara and his party safely to Konoha. I intend to do just that. But if the Akatsuki are involved this mission just got upgraded to at least an A-rank possibly higher. If we just go in blind it'll be a disaster." Naruto could be heard growling, but he didn't argue any further.

"Is she going to be all right?" Temari asked.

"I don't know." Sakura answered as she continued to work on an unconscious Matsuri.

"What do you mean you don't know?" Kankuro snapped. "What kind of medic nin are you?"

"Don't yell at Sakura-chan!" Naruto said loudly. "Sakura-chan's the best!" She lifted her head a bit to send Naruto an appreciative grin.

"Actually Sakura is Lady Tsunade's personal apprentice and is second only to the Hokage herself in healing ability." Kakashi said pleasantly. While Sakura had worked Kankuro had given them a quick rundown on the situation. Both he and Shikamaru were considering their options. Being senior he was the one in charge, but he had no trouble taking advantage of Shikamaru's sharp mind.

"Sorry," Kankuro mumbled a rare apology.

"It's all right." Sakura said. "I understand that you're worried about her. I'm afraid that she's suffered serious a concussion. She has also been poisoned by a toxin I have never seen before. I have done everything that I can to stabilize her condition but she needs to get to a hospital as fast as possible."

"Can you do anything more for her?" Kakashi asked.

Sakura shook her head. "Not without hospital equipment and supplies."

Shikamaru turned to Kakashi. "The situation is troublesome."

Kakashi sent the younger Jonin a careful look. "Care to elaborate?"

"Gaara is facing two opponents whose strength we cannot know. However given Gaara's standing as an S-rank ninja and their obvious confidence that they can defeat him we must act on the assumption that they are both S-rank as well."

Kakashi frowned but nodded. "That does seem the way to bet. Do you have any recommendations?"

Shikamaru turned to Naruto. "Naruto can you make a dozen shadow clones?"

"No problem." He ran through the familiar hand signs and a dozen Narutos came into existence.

Shikamaru turned back to Kakashi. "I recommend we take advantage of Naruto's talent to help both scout and evacuate. Have two of his clones help get Matsuri and Kankuro to Konoha as fast as possible while the others head towards Gaara. They can scout out the situation and offer aid. Meanwhile the rest of us can continue and use Naruto's information to best advantage."

Kakashi nodded and turned to his student. "All right Naruto you heard him, go and help Gaara and if it's at all possible get him out of there and bring him towards us."

"Right!" Ten clones got moving at high speed to the west. One picked Matsuri up gently and headed in the opposite direction. But when the last one tried to help Kankuro he was held at arm's length.

"Hey! I'm not going to Konoha I'm coming with you and helping to fight."

"Kankuro," his sister stepped up beside him and smiled at him sweetly. "Without your puppets you'd be a liability in a fight. It would be best if you went to Konoha to look after Matsuri."

Kankuro frowned and shook his head. "I don't run from fights."

"Kankuro what I think you fail to realize is..." In mid sentence she punched the base of his skull hard. Turned off like a light he began to drop but was caught by his big sister. "Here you go." She handed him over to Naruto's clone.

"Was that necessary?" Shikamaru asked.

"No, but it was quick."

"All right, the rest of you come on. We have to help Gaara." Kakashi said and they all got moving.

You Akatsuki bastards, Naruto thought, I won't let you take Gaara!

What friends are for

107

Gaara gathered the sand back around him into a solid sphere. Up above it what appeared to be a floating eye stared down at him. Sasori was smart enough to understand that this was Gaara's way of making sure he was left alone to perform a very complex jutsu. He was also smart enough to guess what the jutsu would be used for.

"What's going on master Sasori?" Deidara landed a few feet away from him.

"It seems the jinchuuriki is about to take on its true form." Sasori replied calmly.

"Really?" Deidara smiled and eyed the sand in anticipation. "This is truly fun! How about I see just how much damage that shell can take?"

"No."

"Excuse me?"

Sasori turned to his partner. "I said no. Don't waste the chakra. That shell is obviously made to be his most powerful defense. We'll wait to attack his true form."

Deidara chuckled. "I thought you hated waiting."

"I do don't remind me!" He looked back at the shell. "Get back in the air. We'll use attack plan 4."

"As you like master Sasori." Deidara got back into the air again.

Sasori remained where he was and tried to be patient. *Damn it, don't keep me waiting.*

Let me out! The voice howled. *No, now shut up!* Gaara knew his normal calm façade was missing. This was why he didn't like to transform. Whenever he did so the wall separating him from Shukaku got weaker and his self control became strained. But there was no helping it. If he wanted his full power he had to do this. And after what these bastards had done to Matsuri there was no way he was letting them get away. *I hope she is all right. Who cares!* The voice cried out. ***Just think about the blood!! Think about tearing them apart! Let me do it and I promise they'll suffer before I kill them! Shut up, I will never let you take control again.*** The demon's voice kept howling about blood and death but Gaara had long experience in blocking it out. He concentrated on completing the transformation.

It had been five minutes and Sasori was losing what little patience he had. It was then that he felt a strange chakra begin to pulse from the sand shell. When he saw the shell begin to crack he nodded. *Finally.*

The shell exploded and a massive wave of sand began to flow out and take form. Before Sasori's eyes a gigantic monster over two hundred feet tall came to horrifying life. Planting its four legs made the earth shake. Rearing back it let looses a long bestial howl.

Leaping into the air Sasori opened his mouth and fired out dozens of needles. They struck and exploded. This only succeeded in getting Shukaku's attention. " **You should never have come here.**" Shukaku brought down a single great paw. Sasori leapt away. The paw flattened several trees and made the ground shake. Though massive Shukaku was also fast. With another paw he snatched Sasori from the air in mid leap. With an evil laugh Shukaku brought the now helpless Akatsuki before his golden eyes. " **Any final words before I crush the life from you?**"

Sasori looked up at the monster's face. He laughed. "I must admit you are a real challenge aren't you?"

Shukaku grinned and squeezed.

They came to a jarring stop as they felt the earth shake and heard a monstrous roar.

"What was that?" Kakashi asked. Among their group three people knew.

Temari blanched as she felt an old terror fill her heart. "Oh no, he did it." Naruto and Sasuke both also knew.

"Did what?" Shikamaru asked his suddenly pale and shaking girlfriend. He reached over and put a hand on her shoulder. "Temari, what's happened?"

"Gaara's turned into the Shukaku." Naruto said with certainty. "Come on." Instead of continuing he ran up the tree he was perched on. Once he got to the top he had a clear view for miles. "Gaara."

"What is that?" Sakura cried out. Though they were still miles away they could clearly see the one tail demon raccoon.

"That's Gaara," Naruto said. "That is what he looks like when he takes on the Shukaku's form. That's what he looked like when we fought."

Shikamaru stared at him. "Naruto! You fought that and *won* ?" Shikamaru was suddenly feeling a whole new level of respect for the loud mouth blonde.

"He did." Sasuke confirmed. He turned to the girl next to him. "That's what he saved you from Sakura."

Sakura looked over to her blonde teammate. "Naruto..." She whispered.

Sasuke looked at him as well. All the memories of that day came rushing back to him. That sense of awe at the sheer power Naruto had within him. That gnawing jealousy and sense of self doubt. Sasuke looked at Naruto and wondered how he could be so powerful. And he wondered if he had grown even more powerful since. *While I've gotten weaker, damn it.*

"We have to hurry!" Temari said suddenly snapping out of it. "The longer he remains in that form the more likely it is that the demon will affect his mind!"

"Naruto," Shikamaru called as they got moving again. "Your clones must be pretty close by now. What can you tell us?"

Naruto shook his head. "Nothing yet. Once I make them I can give them orders but I'm not in their minds. I only learn what they do after they're destroyed."

"How do just two ninja expect to defeat something like that? They must be insane." Sakura said.

"That would be a dangerous assumption Sakura." Shikamaru replied. "These aren't some random bandits Gaara just happened to run into. They are members of an elite criminal organization whose members include Uchiha Itachi. Gaara was specifically targeted and attacked. I'm certain that means Akatsuki feels that these two are powerful enough to defeat him even in this form."

Shukaku opened his palm to reveal only hunks of wood and metal. "**Where's the blood?!**"

In some bushes a young red haired boy severed his chakra strings. "What a waste. I'll have to rebuild it from scratch now." Looking up in the sky he saw his partner diving down unnoticed from Shukaku's backside. Sasori smiled. "But it should be well worth it."

Deidara took the clay from the mouth of both hands and molded it into the form of a squat and harmless looking bird. With a smile he tossed the bird away and changed direction to quickly put space between him and it. As Shukaku raged about the lack of blood the bird expanded to the size of a house and began to plummet. *This will use up most of my remaining clay but it'll make one hell of a bang. C-4 my most powerful artistic tool.* He watched excitedly as the giant bird dropped. *That one has enough explosive force to level a whole village. Watch carefully master Sasori for my art truly is a...*

BANG. A deafening explosion filled everything with fire and smoke.

"What was that?" Sakura asked.

Sasuke sent her a disappointed frown. "An explosion obviously."

"Must be one hell of a big one for us to hear it this far away." Shikamaru pointed out.

"Let's try and pick up the pace." Kakashi said. *I have a bad feeling about this.*

"Impossible!" Sasori shouted. As the smoke began to clear away he could see the imposing form of Shukaku still standing there. It seemed they had underestimated their opponent. But as the smoke continued to clear he got a better look. In the very middle of his body was a huge gaping hole. And though Shukaku was still standing it wasn't moving. Looking close he could see sand beginning to spill out from the legs and head. It continued to stand for another minute before collapsing and dissolving into a massive pile of sand. Smiling Sasori headed in. It had certainly been harder than anticipated. But they had succeeded.

Deidara landed near the sand pile. Lying in the middle of it half buried was their target unconscious. He turned to his partners as he arrived. "Well master Sasori what do you say about my art now?"

"Do not confuse an effective weapon for real art. Art is beauty which survives through the ages." Sasori however did give his partner a respectful nod. "But I will admit the result was impressive."

"Yeah, now all that's left is to bring him back to the rendezvous point."

"Get away from Gaara!" A number of voices cried out. The two of them turned and were both forced to jump back to avoid a flurry of kunai. As they watched a number of the same ninja came out of the woods at them. One leapt to the unconscious Gaara and quickly hauled him up onto his shoulder.

"Stop!" Sasori shouted. Despite his greater power he was momentarily forced to give ground as five clones came at him. He pulled out a scroll. Deidara was also backing up and dodging while he made some of his toys. And in that moment when they were both caught unaware one of the clones made off with their prize. "Damn it!" His favorite puppet appeared beside him, the one he'd made from the body of the third Kazekage. He made short work of the clones attacking him just as Deidara did with those on him. But the last one had already made it into the woods. "Come on Deidara we're not losing our target now!" Sasori got moving with his puppet. Deidara got back on his mount and into the air once again.

"I've got Gaara!" Naruto shouted.

"How is he?" Temari asked worriedly.

"He's knocked out but he's all right." Naruto took on a worried look. "They just took out all my other clones. I only have the one with Gaara left. The one who can't fly, he's a puppet master like Kankuro."

"That's interesting. Is your clone headed this way?" Shikamaru asked.

"Yeah, but I'm sure those two are after him."

"All right everyone," Kakashi said. "Take up the battle formation Shikamaru outlined and remember these two just defeated the Shukaku, don't take them lightly."

Temari nodded and gripped her fan tight.

A kunai went through his chest and the clone disappeared with a puff of smoke. With no one holding him up Gaara went sailing through the air and headed for a hard landing. *If he dies all this is for nothing.* Sasori had his puppet fly in and catch him before his landing. "Finally! Now let's..."

" **Rasengan** !" Out of the woods another dozen versions of the same ninja. One of them had a ball of chakra in his open hand. As Sasori looked on he struck his puppet with it and his favorite was ripped apart. Sasori was stunned, not only because Gaara was once again being taken away a clone but because the flesh that had allowed his puppet to wield chakra had just been ruined. His favorite puppet was permanently lost now.

"I'll give you one warning, we have you seriously outnumbered and we are ready to act with deadly force. If you surrender I will guarantee your life will be spared."

Sasori calmly looked up into the tree branches at the silver haired ninja that had spoken. "You are Kakashi the copy ninja I believe?" Kakashi nodded. Sasori looked at the others. "So there are five of you, not counting all the clones of course." He smiled at them. "And you think you have me outnumbered?"

"Even with your partner and discounting the clones it's still five to two and we are all of us of Chunin or Jonin level." With Sasuke there that was a lie but Kakashi saw no reason to mention that.

Sasori laughed and pulled out a scroll. "Count again." With a large puff of smoke a hundred puppets appeared around him. "You are the ones who are outnumbered."

"You're bluffing," Temari shouted out angrily. "My brother is a puppet master and I know for a fact that it's impossible for a single person to manipulate more than ten puppets at once. No matter how skilled you are you can't use all these puppets at the same time."

"You think not?" With a blurred wave of his hands all one hundred gathered into a circle surrounding him and raced around in perfect motion. "I am Sasori of the red sands and I am no ordinary puppet master. With these puppets I have defeated entire armies and conquered nations. Against them and me you have no hope of victory or even of survival. However I have no quarrel with you. Return Gaara to me and I will spare you."

"Spare us?!" Naruto screamed. "You Akatsuki bastard I'm going to kill you for what you did! And you *don't* have us outnumbered!" He felt the anger fill him and with it the red chakra. " **Multiple Shadow Clones Technique.**" As he completed the last hand sign the entire area was filled with a pall of smoke. Every one of them who watched could feel their hairs stand up as the chakra pulsed through the very air. And when that massive puff of smoke lifted they were all amazed to see two thousand clones surrounding Sasori and his puppets.

"What?!" Sakura looked on stunned.

Naruto, you truly are amazing. Kakashi thought.

Damn it! Sasuke thought. *How can you be so powerful?* He clenched his fists in bitter frustration as the gap between them was made abundantly clear. *How can I ever beat my brother when I'm not even a match for you?*

Sasori looked at the one he assumed to be the original and spoke calmly. "Ah, I think I understand. You are obviously a Leaf ninja and

given your tirade just now you clearly care deeply for Gaara's fate. Why? He is a ninja from another village."

"Because he's my friend! He is precious to me and I won't let anyone hurt him!"

"A friend? Are you sure of that? He is after all just a jinchuuriki, just a sad freak his village used to contain the Shukaku. He is not even human, he is a monster."

"Shut up!" Temari screamed at him. "You're the only monster here!"

"That's right! I **hate** you Akatsuki bastards! You don't even see Gaara as a human being! To you all he is is something to be used and thrown away! He's a human being damn it and he deserves to be treated like one!" Naruto shouted.

Sasori laughed. "You would feel that way wouldn't you? You are after all a jinchuuriki as well and the possessor of the Kyuubi."

"What?!" Sakura gasped.

That explains it! Sasuke thought.

He is?! Temari gasped. And suddenly it all made sense just why Naruto had been able to reach Gaara where no one else ever had. That's why so many people in his village seem to hate him! He must have gone through everything Gaara did growing up. She looked back down to see Naruto was looking back at them. She could see by the look on his face he was afraid what they would think. He endured that pain and somehow he never gave up. Even after being hated by his entire village he still believed in caring about and protecting others. She shut her eyes and a single tear fell. Uzumaki Naruto, arigato.

Even in the middle of a battlefield Naruto felt panic that his secret was being told to his precious people. He turned back to look at them. Kakashi knew of course. Temari was surprised but seemed

accepting. Sasuke was the same; he saw surprise but no fear of hatred. Then he looked to Sakura. He saw her eyes and the way she was looking at him. He turned away as he felt an old and familiar hurt.

Sasori laughed. "They didn't know did they?"

"No," he choked out. "My sensei knew but not the others."

"Still think you're just a normal human being? You are a monster and that is the only way the world will ever see you."

"No, one day they will see me as Hokage." All two thousand clones pulled out kunai and took a menacing step forward. "But you won't be alive to see it."

The one Naruto clone who had taken Gaara was sitting down beside him underneath the shade of a pine tree. The plan had been to get Gaara to this spot a safe distance away from the fighting. The clone was surprised when a clay spider landed on his head. Before he could try to get it off it exploded and he puffed out of existence.

Deidara quickly landed and got off his steed. *This has been a lot more troubled than master Sasori or I ever expected.* As he hurried to Gaara his body suddenly froze in place. "What is this?"

"It's called shadow possession technique; it's a specialty of the Nara clan." A friendly disembodied voice answered.

"Who the hell said that?" Against his will Deidara stood up and turned towards a tree on his right. There as he watched a Leaf ninja seemed to materialize out of thin air.

"Nara Shikamaru at your service. I suspected that since Gaara was your goal that if we got him away from the rest of the team one of you would try to get him back while we were busy with the other."

Deidara stuffed his hands into the pockets of his cloak and began walk in a mimicry of his captor's movements.

"What are you planning to do to me?" Deidara asked as he came to a halt in front of a large oak tree.

"I plan to make you bow."

"Huh?" Standing in open space Shikamaru bowed. As Deidara did the same he smacked his head against the tree and knocked himself out.

Sasori realized he was about to die. He had truly not expected that. He had gone into this operation certain that he and his partner were powerful enough to deal with Gaara and his insignificant escort. And they had been. But none of their plans had involved fighting a second jinchuuriki, and one more powerful than Gaara. When they had run into each other he'd had no idea until all those shadow clones came into existence what he was facing. Even then he'd felt sure he was strong enough to deal with it. His puppets were lightning fast and deadly and he had used them with all his usual skill and flair. But the numbers had simply been too uneven and when the other ninjas joined in he began losing puppets to their combined attacks. Chidori, fire jutsus, wind attacks, and that girl with her crushing strength. And he'd been unable to harm a single one of them. Whenever an opening appeared a clone was sure to jump in to protect his target from harm. He destroyed hundreds upon hundreds of clones but it helped not at all as he kept losing puppets. Now he was at the end. He had only four puppets left and was surrounded by the ninjas and the remaining hundred or so clones. Actually the dark haired ninja seemed at the end of his tether but the rest looked eager to keep fighting. He could have transferred himself to any of his other puppets, but that did him no good when they were all surrounded.

"If you surrender I still guarantee your life." Kakashi repeated.

Sasori thought about it for a moment but slowly shook his head. "If you've beaten me then I deserve only destruction. However I will give you a reward for defeating me. I believe you Leaf ninjas still have a quarrel with Orochimaru?"

"You might say that," Kakashi answered carefully.

"He was once a member of our organization and was in fact my partner. Since his betrayal I have made it a point of keeping track of him. Go to the Tenchi Bridge in the grass village at noon ten days from now. I have a spy within Orochimaru's subordinates and I am to meet with him there."

"Why should we believe you?" A still bitter and angry Naruto asked.

Sasori answered. "Because the dead have no reason to lie." He launched himself at Naruto.

" **Rasengan!**" He leapt forward to meet the attack. Without a second thought he drove his rasengan into his enemy's chest and without knowing it into the cylinder which contained his human heart. Destroying the heart blood splattered onto Naruto's face and clothes. Sasori was thrown back and collapsed to the ground filled with the wreckage of his puppets. With his last bit of energy he looked up into a clear blue sky and slowly shut his eyes. *I wonder if I'll see mother and father.*

The remaining four puppets collapsed to the earth. The five of them stood there tired and huffing. With a thought Naruto dismissed the last of his clones. Tired he looked up at Sakura. Seeing his red eyes and blood splattered on his face she flinched just a bit and looked away.

"I'm going to go check on Gaara." Naruto quickly said.

Kakashi nodded. "All right we'll finish up here."

"I'm coming with you." Temari said.

"Gaara?"

He slowly opened his eyes. He saw a young blonde haired man smiling down at him. "Uzumaki Naruto." He said in a weak voice.

"Gaara how are you feeling?" Temari asked.

"I am exhausted but otherwise fine. How are Kankuro and Matsuri?"

"They're both on their way to Konoha as we speak. We had Sakura, the Hokage's apprentice and a medic nin with us. She was able to stabilize Matsuri's condition before we sent her out."

"Will she be all right?"

Temari shook her shoulders in a helpless gesture. "We don't know." She turned to Naruto and without warning leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "Thank you Naruto for all that you have done for my brother, not just today but from the beginning."

Blushing a bit he scratched the back of his head. "Uhm, you're welcome."

"Don't get any ideas Naruto she's taken." Shikamaru commented.

"Heh, no problem I'm in love with Hinata."

"Hey!" Four sets of eyes turned to their prisoner. "How long are you going to leave me tied to this tree?"

"Don't worry; I'm sure we'll be leaving soon." Shikamaru said dryly. "There's a charming fellow named Ibiki who I'm sure you'll be getting to know."

Naruto nodded his firm agreement. Looking at his friend and knowing what nearly happened to him a few talks with Ibiki were nothing. Gaara was trying to stand. Naruto put a hand under his arm and helped him to his feet.

Gaara looked at him and slowly nodded. "Thank you Naruto."

He smiled. "Any time Gaara, that's what friends are for."

Return to Konoha

The ring looked interesting. Kakashi slipped it off and dropped it into the pouch with the other possessions taken from Sasori's 'body.' Tying the pouch shut, he tossed it onto the body. He then pulled out a blank scroll, brush, and small jar of ink.

"Kakashi-sensei, why are we piling up all these broken puppets?" Sakura asked.

"It's called tidying up the battlefield Sakura. If time allows you should always do two things; bury all the dead and either take or destroy all supplies that your enemy might use. We have no idea if the Akatsuki have any other puppet users. We'll turn these puppets into a bonfire just in case."

Sakura nodded and then hesitated to speak. "Kakashi-sensei, was it true what he said about Naruto?"

Kakashi looked at her and Sasuke. "Yes it is Sakura. Does it make a difference to you?"

"No! Of course not." She gave a weak smile. "I mean he's still Naruto right?"

"Yes he *is* Sakura. You've just found out about it but this has been true the entire time you've known him. The only thing that's changed is that now you know." He looked over at Sasuke. "Do you have a problem with this?"

Sasuke shrugged. "Actually I'm relieved."

Kakashi raised an eyebrow. "Relieved?"

"That's right, this isn't the first time I've seen Naruto's full power. It always drove me crazy trying to figure out just how he could be so strong. Now I finally know."

"Well I have to admit I wasn't expecting that for an answer." Kakashi looked at the both of them. "Now that you know the truth I also need to tell you about a law the Sandaime made. You are not permitted to tell anyone who doesn't know about it. The punishment for breaking this law is death. And I *strongly* suggest you not discuss it at all once we return to Konoha."

"Uhm, Kakashi-sensei what are we supposed to do?" Sakura asked.

"About what?"

"Well... how are we supposed to act around Naruto now that we know?"

He frowned at her. "The exact same way you always have. Listen you two; Naruto has suffered terribly because of this. He has endured constant pain and scorn from nearly everyone, and all for something that was done to him and that he had no choice in. He has fought to make ties with others. I know he treasures the bonds he has forged with both of you. I am sure he would be deeply hurt were those connections damaged by this. So I hope neither of you will treat him differently."

Sasuke smirked. "He's still the same old dobe to me."

"Oh, I'll still treat him the same as always." Sakura gave a nervous laugh.

Kakashi sighed. He made a hand sign. "**Seal.**" The body and pouch before him were sealed into the scroll. "All right let's finish up here so we can head home."

Temari leaned over to Naruto. "Naruto can I talk to you about a... delicate issue?"

Naruto looked alarmed. "Temari you're not going to ask me out on a date are you?" Gaara and Shikamaru immediately looked at her.

With an embarrassed grin she shook her head. "No Naruto, one *troublesome* man in my life is plenty. Actually I wanted to talk to you about the... revelation we heard."

Naruto looked blank for a moment but then a light came on. "Oh! You mean about me being the container for the Kyuubi." She stared at him. "It's o.k. Gaara and Shika both know."

"What?" She turned to her boyfriend. "You knew Naruto held the Kyuubi?"

"Yes." He answered warily. "How do you know?"

"The heartless bastard we were fighting made an announcement. How could you know and not tell me?"

"The third Hokage passed a law that no one who knew could tell anyone who didn't. The punishment for breaking the law is death. I figured you wouldn't want me breaking the law or risking death."

She frowned but nodded. "All right." She turned to her brother. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You never asked." Gaara said reasonably. Temari had a pained look.

"So what did you want to ask me Temari?"

"I was going to ask you if you would mind if I told Gaara and Shikamaru the truth."

They were finally ready to get going. Gaara was still feeling weakened so Naruto had volunteered to help him. He'd also made a couple clones to carry their tied and gagged prisoner.

"I realize everyone here is tired from a full day of travel and the battle. But I think it would be best to try and get to Konoha as soon

as possible."

No one had any objection, but as they got ready Sakura slowly approached Naruto.

"Uhm, Naruto can I talk to you for a minute?"

When she asked him that he sent her a look colder and harder than she'd ever seen on his face. "What is it Sakura?"

Sakura? Where's the chan? "Naruto I just want you to know that it doesn't make any difference to me that you have the Kyuubi."

Naruto's eyes were hard and seemed to bore right through her. "Liar." He said coldly.

"What?"

"I called you a liar Sakura." He said in a flat clear voice. "I saw the look in your eyes when you found out the truth. I recognized it. It's a look I've seen a million times from a thousand different people. I just never thought I would see it from you."

"Naruto I don't know what you mean." She said pleadingly.

"You're afraid of me." He clarified.

"Naruto I..." She wanted to deny it, but the truth was she was a little scared at the thought of the Kyuubi being inside of him. She thought if she lied it would be worse so taking a deep breath she admitted to the truth. "All right, I admit it worries me a little. I mean I grew up on stories about what the Kyuubi did that night."

"Stories?" He said accusingly. "Are those stories more important to you than everything we've been through together? How could you ever think I'd hurt you Sakura? I've put my body and my life on the line to protect you more times than I can remember. You're one of my precious people, like Gaara or Hinata or teme. I'd give my life to protect you. But what does that matter when you've heard stories."

"Naruto I know you would never hurt me!"

"But you're still afraid."

She looked down at the ground. "A little." She whispered.

"Then maybe you should stay away." He said.

She looked up shocked that he would even suggest that. "Naruto I don't want that!"

Ignoring her he leapt away. "Come on it's a long way back to Konoha."

Kakashi sighed. *Naruto don't let your hurt push away the people who care about you.* He and the others leapt to follow after him. With Sakura bringing up the rear.

Despite not being the team leader and carrying Gaara with him it was Naruto who set the pace. With him in the lead they pushed hard and arrived in Konoha shortly before sunrise. Though everyone was exhausted Gaara, Temari, and Shikamaru all headed for the hospital. Kakashi told his team to wait so he could speak to them.

"I just want to let you all know I am very proud of the way all of you came together to handle a difficult mission and hard fight." He looked at both at Naruto and Sakura. "I hope you all appreciate just how important that is." Sakura was looking dejectedly at Naruto who was refusing to look in her direction. Kakashi sighed. *I'll give them some time.* "I'll take care of writing up the mission report and checking in with the Hokage. Take the rest of today and tomorrow off, you've earned it. We'll meet at the bridge at noon two days from now."

Sasuke smirked. "So we should expect you around two I guess."

"Is there anything else Kakashi-sensei?" Naruto asked impatiently. Kakashi shook his head and he immediately leapt away. By his

direction he was headed to the hospital rather than back to his apartment.

Sakura had been hesitantly trying to approach him when he left. She had tried talking to him during their return but he'd refused to acknowledge her. Watching him go she felt miserable. *How do I fix this?*

"Don't worry about it Sakura."

She turned to him. "What do you mean Sasuke-kun?"

He began to walk away. "I'll have a talk with him later."

"I'd really appreciate that Sasuke-kun. You won't yell at him though will you?" Strangely for all the times she had physically assaulted him she worried Naruto was not able to handle harsh treatment from his friends.

He looked back over his shoulder at her. "I won't even raise my voice."

Naruto managed to catch up to them before they got to the hospital. So the four of them as a group found Kankuro sitting on a bench outside operating room one. After confirming that Gaara and the others were fine he told them about Matsuri.

"We only got back a couple hours ahead of you. Tsunade came in and she's the one treating her right now. She's been in surgery for about an hour now. That's really all I know." With that there was nothing to do but sit and wait.

"You hit me." Kankuro said to his sister.

Temari grinned unapologetically. "It's not the first time and knowing you it won't be the last."

It was another couple hours before the red operating room sign was turned off. They all immediately got to their feet. The operating room doors swung open and Lady Tsunade walked out. She was surprised to see who was there.

"Gaara! I was told about the attack." She nodded to Kankuro. "Are you all right?"

"I am Hokage-san, thanks to Naruto and his fellow Leaf nins as well as Temari. I wish to thank you both personally and on behalf of my village."

Tsunade then turned to Naruto. "Was anyone hurt?" Naruto tiredly shook his head. "Just as soon as I'm done here I want you to come with me and give me a report on everything that happened."

"Ah come on baachan do I have to? Kakashi said he'd do all that." The moment the words were out of his mouth he saw a vein begin to throb on Tsunade's forehead. Temari and Kankuro both grinned at him, while Shikamaru shut his eyes and shook his head.

"Baachan?" Gaara looked at him in surprise. "I did not know she was your grandmother Naruto. Did she adopt you?" Kankuro burst out laughing.

"Damn it brat how many times have I told you not to call me that?! Call me Hokage or Lady Tsunade in public at least!"

Blushing he nodded. "I'm sorry Hokage-sama."

Tsunade looked at least slightly mollified. "All right brat try and remember it from now on."

"Hey! If I'm going to call you Hokage then don't call me brat in public either."

Tsunade gave him a self satisfied grin. "You know what? I think I will Hokage's prerogative."

Naruto crossed his arms over his chest. "Fine! But when I'm Hokage I am sooo going to call you baachan in public."

"You mean like you do now?" She said flatly.

"Pardon me Hokage-san." Temari spoke up. "But as entertaining as all this may be, could you please tell us how Matsuri is doing?"

She gave them a pleased smile. "I was able to fully remove the toxin and heal her concussion. She will need to sleep for some time yet but she'll make a full recovery."

Gaara took a step back and made a deep bow to her. Kankuro and Temari quickly followed his example. "Lady Tsunade you have my deepest thanks for saving the life of my apprentice."

"Gaara it was my pleasure."

"You killed an Akatsuki?" She said sounding more than a little impressed. They were sitting in her hospital office.

Naruto looked embarrassed and rubbed the back of his head. "Well I couldn't have done it without everyone's help."

Tsunade nodded. "Of course you needed your team's help. Your willingness to acknowledge that speaks well of you. But the fact remains that you were the one to deliver the killing blow correct?" He nodded. "Very well then, once we determine what bounties he may have had on him they'll be yours."

"Nani?"

"Sasori was an S-rank criminal he's bound to have had significant bounties. As the one who ended his life those belong to you."

"But..."

Knowing he would be loathe to accept his just rewards she decided to change the subject. "As for Sakura don't you think your reaction was rather harsh?"

He frowned and set his face. "I should have known you'd take her side."

Tsunade shook her head. "It's got nothing to do with sides brat. Look, she didn't take the news as well as you would have liked. You're disappointed in her reaction. I can understand that, but saying you want to end your friendship with her because of a *look* ? Come on doesn't that seem a little much?"

"A *look* ! It's not just a look!" He was talking loudly, nearly shouting at her. "It's proof that she's afraid of what's inside me! She even admitted it! She said she was worried because of the stories about the Kyuubi. Even after all the time we've known each other, even after everything we've been through together, even after I've saved her life *it still doesn't matter!*" He shut his eyes and looked down. "It doesn't matter; she hates me like everyone else."

"Naruto!" She came around from behind her desk. "She doesn't hate you! You said yourself that all she said was that she was a little afraid. She didn't say anything about not wanting to remain friends with you. From what you told me it sounds like she was trying to make that clear to you." Tsunade was surprised to see him shuddering a bit and to see tears slowly running down his cheeks. She took the boy in her arms and gave him a comforting hug. "Naruto she doesn't hate you."

"But she will." He said thickly. "I know how it goes, I've seen it. First comes the fear and then the hate, they always go together."

"Naruto listen to me. I know for a fact that Sakura missed you terribly while you were away and that she was very happy to be on a team with you again. She knows you, she's not some stranger. Even if she is a little afraid go and talk to her and I'm sure you'll realize her other feelings for you are far stronger."

"I don't know."

"Do you *really* want to lose the special connection you share with her?"

He thought about it. "Maybe, can I go now?" Tsunade nodded, she had said what she needed to. As he turned to leave he suddenly stopped and looked back at her. "Oh baachan, can I ask you something?"

Deciding not to waste her breath she answered. "What brat?"

"Do you know when team Kurenai is expected back?"

Tsunade grinned. "They returned late last night."

"Thanks baachan!"

"That's Hokage!" She was yelling to an empty room.

Kankuro dug into his eggs and began shoveling them into his mouth. "I guess you forgot to pack your leash."

Temari frowned at him. Though she was hungry she had little enthusiasm for hospital food. "Since we know Matsuri is going to be all right there was no reason for him to stay longer. He doesn't know her so I really appreciate him coming and staying as long as he did with me."

"Wow I never thought I would hear you sound so domesticated." He gave her one of his infuriating smiles. "It almost sounds like you were *married* to him."

"Quiet!" She hissed at him. "No one is supposed to know about that until after Gaara makes the announcement."

"Whatever," he loaded his fork down with hash browns and gobbled them down. "So it's not too late to come to your senses. I mean I

know you hate admitting when you're wrong, but geez." He liked making her snarl like that.

"The only mistake would be for me *not* to go through with it."

"Yeah? Well what makes him so special? I mean you had tons of great guys just throwing themselves at you."

"He loves me." She said simply.

"That it?"

She frowned at him. "He also happens to be intelligent, kind, thoughtful, and warm."

"I didn't hear energetic in there." More eggs were shoved into his mouth."

"Well he does have one other quality I really like." She said with a sweet smile.

"What's that?" He took a drink of tea.

"He's a tender and considerate lover."

Kankuro spat up his tea and tried not to choke.

Gaara sat in a chair beside Matsuri's bed. He watched her sleeping form and patiently waited for her to open her eyes.

"Have Kankuro and Temari gone?" Tsunade asked as she entered the room.

Gaara looked at her. "No, they are having breakfast at the moment."

Tsunade nodded. "You should too."

"I've had a rations bar that will suffice."

Tsunade looked at the scene and smiled. "I understand, people often refuse to be separated from their loved ones at times like these."

"Loved one? I am afraid you are mistaken. My concern for Matsuri is as her sensei and her Kazekage. I have no feelings beyond those."

"If you say so." She said innocently. "Since her condition is now stable I'll be leaving to go to the Tower. Please come and meet with me at your earliest convenience."

"I shall."

"Oh and by the way," she said off handedly. "If you're planning to stay here until she wakes up you may want to hold her hand and talk to her while she's asleep."

"I beg your pardon?" He looked at her in surprise.

"It's a well established medical fact that unconscious patients respond to stimuli. Simple human contact was wondrous effects on the healing process. If you hold her hand and talk to her she may well awaken sooner." With a tiny grin she left.

Gaara continued to stare at Matsuri for a moment. He was really not that comfortable with human contact, but he did want to help her recover. At last he took one of her hands carefully into his. "I am not sure what I should talk about as you are unconscious. I suppose I will go over my agenda for the next few days. To begin with I had intended to have breakfast at 7 a.m. afterwards..." As he talked to her he began to get used to the feel of her soft warm hand in his. After a time it no longer seemed so strange to him.

She hurried down the stairs with a bounce to her step. When he saw her she saw his jaw drop. She couldn't help but smile. She was wearing a simple white blouse, a short red skirt, white stockings, and red heels. The way he was eying her she felt sure he appreciated her choice in wardrobe.

"Wow! Hinata-chan you are so hot!"

They shared a hug and a quick kiss. "Well thank you Naruto-kun."

He pulled her back in for another hug. "Mmmm, my Hinata-chan."

She absolutely loved hearing him call her that. "I am you know."

He gave her a confused look. "Huh?"

She smiled at him. "Yours." She clarified.

He gave her a huge grin. "Are you ready to get some ramen with me Hinata-chan?" He took a hold of her hand and they got going out of the mansion.

"Of course," she answered happily. "I was really surprised to get your call. I thought you and your team weren't expected back until this evening."

"The mission didn't go as planned." Naruto demonstrated a rare mastery of the understatement.

"Bad?" she asked.

He shrugged. "It worked out all right... mostly."

"What happened?"

"I'll tell you all about it over ramen." As they headed out toward the Hyuga gate he looked at his amazing girlfriend. "Hinata-chan have you ever been afraid of me?"

"Afraid?" She looked puzzled.

"You know, because of..." he pointed to his belly.

She shook her head. "Never."

"How come?" He asked quietly.

She gave his arm a yank bringing him to a halt. She got in front of him so he had no trouble seeing the stern look on her face.

"Because Naruto-kun you're not *him*. I know you would never hurt me."

He gave her a very relieved smile. "Have I told you how much I love you Hinata-chan?"

She giggled and put her arms around him. "Yes, but tell me again Naruto-kun."

Matsuri slowly opened her eyes. It took her a moment to realize she was lying in a bed somewhere.

"I see you are awake." A familiar voice said to her.

"Gaara-sensei, what happened? The last thing I remember is fighting and being struck by that ninja."

"It is all right. Kankuro and I are both fine. Thanks to the Hokage you will also be fine. How do you feel?"

"A bit tired and hungry." She suddenly noticed something and felt her face darken.

"Is something wrong?"

She gulped. "You are holding my hand."

He lifted an eyebrow that wasn't there. "Does my holding your hand offend you?"

"No!" she felt her blush get darker. "I, uhm, rather like it."

"That is fortunate," he said in a serious tone. "As I have come to an important decision. You have been asleep here for several hours and

in that time I have given a great deal of thought to a certain matter."

She looked at him in surprise. "Have you been sitting here that entire time?"

"I have." He replied.

"Thank you." She said humbly.

He was looking at her seriously. "Matsuri, I have decided that I can no longer be your sensei."

"Oh," she said. She felt crushed, but not truly surprised. She had always known she was not strong enough to be Gaara's apprentice. She tried to smile. "I understand. I know I am not powerful enough to warrant your attention. I most humbly thank you Lord Gaara for all the time and kindness you have given me these past years."

And then she saw it. That tiny little twist at the corner of his lips. He had on one of those too rare small smiles of his. "You misunderstand Matsuri. You are a fine ninja and more than deserving of my instruction. That is not the reason I cannot remain your sensei."

"Then why?"

"It would not be proper for me to pursue you as your sensei."

She stared at him not believing what she had just heard. "Pur... pursue me?" *He couldn't mean it like that... could he?*

"Imeisa Matsuri," he said formally. "I wish to court you."

She could feel her heart pound inside her chest. She wanted to scream out that she accepted but she knew she couldn't. She took a deep breath. "Lord Gaara, as much as I welcome those words I am just a commoner. I have no dowry, no property, nothing I can offer you."

"Do you have feelings for me Matsuri?"

She gulped and tried to keep her voice steady. "Ye... yes, I have very strong feelings for you Lord Gaara."

He nodded. "Then we shall call that your dowry. For it is something I treasure more than any land or money." He looked at her seriously, but with something else in his eyes too. "Matsuri I am still trying to understand what love is. I do not know if that is what I feel for you. I know only that had you died I would have been hurt worse than I have been since the death of my uncle. I know I wish you to be near me and not only as my student. Even if I cannot name them I know I have feelings for you, and I would be most pleased if you would accept my courtship."

She stared at him hardly believing what he had just said. *He cares for me! If this is a dream please never let me wake.* "Sabaku no Gaara," she spoke in a shaky voice. "I gladly accept your courtship."

He stood up and leaned towards. Slowly and carefully he gave her his very first kiss. She shut her eyes and was amazed that it was everything she dreamed it would be.

Without warning

Author's Note: I want to take the time to respond to a few people who have complained that my story is moving further and further from the actual events in the manga and anime. That response is quite simply that this is my story and it was *never* my intention to have it remain completely or almost completely in canon. This story is an AU with changes all beginning at the moment Temari gave Shikamaru a hug. This story is my version of how the Naruto characters and events *might* have been. That is after all the point of fan fiction. To which I am letting you all know that in this story Shikamaru's birthday will be Oct. 22nd. I realize that his bio has it as Sep 22nd but simply put the story works better if Naruto becomes 16 before Shikamaru does.

106

If you had asked Sakura to describe her ideal date she would have told you it involved a walk through a quiet park under moonlight. For Temari the perfect date could only involve a great deal of dancing. Ino had twisted fantasies that involved a surprise visit to a jewelry store. For Hinata the perfect date centered around only one thing; privacy. As a member of the Hyuga clan's main branch she had attended more formal dinners and functions than she could count. These she rarely enjoyed for to her they were missions. She was expected to behave with the dignity and formal grace of a Hyuga at all times. She was only too aware that she was constantly under observation and that any word or action that was anything less than proper would bring her father's immediate disapproval. Hinata was the soul of kindness and good manners and never had any trouble meeting the expectations set for her. But it was work, it was duty, it was certainly not relaxing or fun. For Hinata her perfect date was spent in a nice quiet home with her special person.

And at the moment everything really was perfect. The two of them were sitting on his old couch with her curled up on his lap. The two of

them were enjoying a very intense make out session. As they came up for air Naruto gave her a very happy smile.

"Wow Hinata-chan you definitely know how to take my mind off my troubles."

Giggling she leaned against his chest. "Thank you Naruto-kun, I'm glad I'm able to make you happy."

"You're so amazing Hinata-chan." He tenderly caressed her cheek and leaned in to kiss her again. She closed her eyes and eagerly returned his kisses. It was wonderful and they were both very happy.

So of course it was at that moment that there was a loud knock on the door. Their heads came apart. Naruto sent the door an angry look as if blaming it for the unwanted interruption.

"GO AWAY!!" He shouted.

"Naruto-kun," Hinata sent him a disapproving look. "That's rude!" He gave his girlfriend an apologetic and guilty look.

"Open up dobe I need to talk to you."

"What is it Sasuke-teme I'm kind of busy."

"Naruto," Hinata frowned at him.

"I just want us to be alone." Naruto said defensively.

"So do I but you still can't be rude to people who just want to see you."

"I haven't got all day dobe." An annoyed voice came from the other side of the door.

Seeing he was not going to get away with just ignoring him Naruto got up and answered the door. There was Sasuke in his usual dark

jacket and khaki pants looking bored as usual. "What do I owe the honor of your visit?"

"Can I come in?"

Sighing he stepped aside. "Sure."

Once he was inside Sasuke saw Hinata sitting there on the couch. "Hello Hinata." He gave Naruto a knowing smirk. "Did I interrupt?"

"Yes." Naruto said.

"No." Hinata said.

As the two of them looked at each other Sasuke enjoyed a dry chuckle. "Whatever, this won't take long." Then without any warning Sasuke reached back and sent a fist into his jaw knocking a surprised Naruto down.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata leapt over the couch and got to his side. "Why did you do that?" She demanded angrily.

Naruto was sitting up on the floor and rubbing his jaw. "Teme I am so going to kick your ass for that."

"Listen dobe I just needed to get your attention so I could set you straight. You need to go apologize to Sakura for being such an ass before."

Naruto got up to his feet and sent his friend an angry look. "No way am I going to apologize for what I said. I saw the way she looked at me. She's afraid of me!"

Sasuke gave him a bored expression. "So?"

"So?! What do you mean so? She's supposed to be my friend she shouldn't be scared of me because of this."

"Maybe not, but she is, at least a little. So what are you going to do about it?" Naruto simply stared back at him. "She doesn't hate you dobe, even if she's a little afraid so what? Are you really going to stop being friends with her because of that? People aren't perfect and you don't have so many friends you should just be throwing them away."

Naruto stared at him. "Since when are you the one to worry about Sakura's feelings?"

"Don't get the wrong idea." He said flatly. "I just don't want to deal with a whole lot of pointless tension and drama every time our team gets together. You care about Sakura and she cares about you that should be enough. Anyway I've said what I came to say. I'll see you later dobe." With that Sasuke left.

"You know Naruto-kun I think Sasuke makes a good point. I know Sakura's reaction hurt you, but don't you think you should at least talk to her about it?" Hinata said reasonably.

He looked at her. "Maybe," he said slowly. "You and baachan both say that so maybe I should."

Hinata smiled happily. "Good! Now if you'll excuse me I want to go have a word with Sasuke."

"What? You're leaving?"

She gave him a comforting little kiss. "I just want to talk to him for a minute I'll be right back I promise." Before he could come up with an argument she left.

"Sasuke!"

Sasuke halted and turned around, surprised to see her approach him. "What is it Hinata?"

Smiling she immediately dropped into a juken fighting stance and struck him with a perfect four hit combo that ended with a palm strike to his jaw. As he lay flat on his back she stood over him and spoke in a clear frank tone. "While I appreciate you trying to repair Naruto's friendship with Sakura don't ever hit him again unless you're sparring."

Sasuke looked up at her feeling amazed that he had actually gotten sucker punched as easily as the dobe. "Was Naruto afraid to tell me that himself?"

Laughing Hinata shook her head. "Naruto *afraid*? No, this is my own way of letting you know that attacking him just to make a point is *not* o.k. I won't stand by and let *anyone* do that to him." She turned around and headed back to his apartment. "Have a good day Sasuke."

Watching her go Sasuke shook his head. *Naruto you are one very lucky guy.*

As Hinata calmly walked away Inner Hinata did a victory dance. ***Yatah! Kicking Sasuke's ass was as much fun as I always thought it would be.***

In the middle of ANBU headquarters a figure in an ANBU cloak and eagle mask entered the evidence room. "Pardon me. I am looking for the personal effects of the two Akatsuki who recently fought team Kakashi."

The clerk looked up at him. "That is still being processed."

"Please bring them to me."

"I can't I..." The clerk suddenly paused.

"Please bring me the personal effects." The ANBU repeated patiently.

"Of course." The clerk said in a daze. He brought the box containing them.

The ANBU carefully inspected what was inside. Finding the two rings he carefully removed them and handed the box back to the clerk. "Thank you; please continue with what you were doing." The clerk took back the box as the ANBU departed.

There was a loud knock on the door.

"I'll get it mom." Sakura called. Going over to the door she opened it. "Naruto! What are you doing here?"

Looking embarrassed he rubbed the back of his head. "Uhm, well I was hoping I could talk to you Sakura-chan."

Hearing the familiar chan she immediately felt much better. "Come in Naruto."

"Thanks." He stepped in and looked around. "This is the first time I've ever been to your home, it's nice."

She smiled. "Thank you Naruto-kun." She took a deep breath. "Naruto, I'm sorry if how I reacted to hearing the truth about you hurt your feelings. You're right compared to everything we have been through together stories shouldn't matter." She looked unhappy. "Naruto even *if* the truth does worry me a little please believe me that I still treasure you and our friendship. I don't want to lose you over this."

Naruto slowly nodded. "I would hate to lose you too Sakura-chan." He let out a sigh. "I understand if you're a little scared, it's just that I didn't want to see that look from one of my precious people. But when I stop and think about it I can't blame you for feeling that way. And I *am* glad to know you still want to be friends."

"So, we are still friends then?" She asked.

Naruto gave her a big smile. "Yeah friends."

"Good! I'm so relieved." She gave Naruto a hug. "Say Naruto did Sasuke-kun go talk to you?"

"Yeah he sure did."

"He didn't yell at you did he?"

Naruto chuckled. "No, he just punched me and told me to stop being such an idiot."

"What?! He punched you?!" Sakura grabbed him by his jacket and began shaking him back and forth violently. "What is wrong with you men? Why does everything with you have to involve violence?" She demanded.

"Uhm Sakura you're scaring me." Naruto said sheepishly.

"Sakura dear who is this?" An older looking woman with pink hair asked.

"Oh mom! This is Naruto! Naruto this is my mom."

Naruto bowed to her. "I am honored to meet you Mrs. Haruno."

They could both see the look on her face. "I am pleased to meet you as well." The lie was obvious. "Sakura dinner is ready, why don't you finish whatever business you have with your... teammate so we can eat."

Feeling uncomfortable he turned to Sakura. "I'll see you on the bridge in a couple days."

But Sakura grabbed an arm. "Naruto, would you like to stay for dinner?"

"Dear we really don't have that much food prepared." Her mother said pleasantly.

"Mom there is plenty of food." Sakura said firmly. "Naruto is a lot more than my teammate; he is one of my closest and dearest friends."

Naruto looked to her and felt deeply touched hearing those words from her. "Thank you Sakura-chan, but Hinata-chan is cooking dinner for me right now."

Sakura nodded. "All right, why don't you come by tomorrow for dinner?"

"Really?"

"Of course." Sakura looked to her mother. "That *would* be o.k. wouldn't it mom? Especially since Naruto-kun *has* saved my life more than once."

"Oh, well of course."

Sakura turned to him. "Will you come Naruto?"

He paused but finally nodded. "I'd really like that Sakura-chan."

Deidara sat in his prison cell bored out of his mind. The heavy chains and shackles on his wrists and ankles were bothersome and even worse ugly. As he sat on the edge of his bunk he heard a commotion outside his cell. After a moment all was quiet again. He then heard the heavy 'clink' of his iron cell door being unlocked. He got up to his feet as the door slowly swung open and an ANBU in an eagle mask entered.

"What do you want?"

"Hello Deidara." A calm voice answered.

He felt a thrill go through him. "Itachi! You've come to rescue me! Hah I knew my friends wouldn't forget me."

"Friends?" The calm cold voice questioned. "You have no friends within the Akatsuki, only associates who share a common goal."

He chuckled. "Well whatever you want to call them as long as you're here to help me escape I don't really care."

"There you are also mistaken. It has been decided that you are of no further use to us."

"What the hell do you mean?! You and Sasori practically forced me to join you."

"That was a mistake on our part. Clearly if you could be so easily captured then you are not fit to be a member of this organization. The Akatsuki will not tolerate failure."

"Then what the hell are you going to do? Kill me?"

"No, the Leaf nins will do that for us. The leader feels that you have no vital information so it does not matter if you are interrogated."

I'm not even important enough to kill? "So what? You're going to just leave me here?"

"That is one option." Without ceremony he tossed him a pouch. "If you wish you can make yourself useful to us one last time."

Deidara opened the pouch. Sure enough it was full of clay. He laughed. "You really are a complete bastard aren't you Itachi?"

"Good bye." In a swirl of wind he was gone.

Deidara shook his head and laughed. He'd thought he'd be important enough to rescue, or at the very least kill. Well it wasn't a very hard choice to make. "I'll make a last great piece of art! It'll be my masterpiece!" He ripped open his prison shirt to reveal a large mouth on his chest that was sewn shut. Ripping open the threads he fed in the clay. His body began to contract into a sphere. *It's too bad master Sasori isn't around to see this. Maybe he'd finally come*

around and admit to my artistry. As his body began to consume itself and convert to pure chakra he prepared to make a truly spectacular show.

At 7:49 p.m., without warning, ANBU headquarters exploded.

Aftermath

105

4:21 a.m.

"I've found one!" Pakkun shouted.

"Where?" Kakashi asked.

"Right beneath me about twenty feet down." Pakkun was standing on a pile of rubble that had been an apartment building only hours before. All around them lay rubble. The explosion that had left a crater where ANBU headquarters had been had *leveled* every building in a two block radius. Sadly that was not the limit of the damage. The explosion had sent debris flying for miles in all directions. Causing damage, wounding, and killing people throughout the village. The Hokage had immediately declared a state of emergency. All missions for the next three days were cancelled and all available shinobi were busy performing rescue and repair work.

"Neji!" Kakashi called out. "I need you over here."

"Yes? How can I help?"

"Pakkun says there's a survivor under here. Can you see if there's a path to reach them?" Pulling survivors out of the rubble was extremely dangerous and tricky. One mistake would send tons of rubble crashing down. Killing the survivor and likely the rescuer as well.

"I believe I do see a space perhaps two feet wide leading to the victim." Neji stated. "You will have to move this section of wall out of the way first."

Kakashi nodded and looked around. "I need Chouji and a clone here!" Upon arriving on the scene Naruto had immediately made two hundred shadow clones and sent them to help in any way they could. They had been a huge help as they could be sent into dangerous areas without a second thought. If anything happened the clone would simply be lost. Naruto's clones had pulled dozens of people out of the rubble and helped hundreds more get to the aid station.

Chouji and one of the clones arrived ready to help. "Chouji I need you to move that section of wall out of the way. Naruto there's a survivor trapped about twenty feet down. Neji says there's a way to crawl down to the victim. Once Chouji clears the wall I need you to go in there and get them out.

"All right." Chouji said.

"Got it!" Naruto said.

" **Partial Body Expansion Technique.** " Chouji's arms expanded and he pulled the heavy section of brick wall out of the way, revealing a small hole. Switching on a flashlight Naruto plunged down the hole. He crawled over bricks, twisted metal, chunks of wood and broken junk. As he went he had to be careful not to grab a jutting nail or broken piece of glass that might break the skin and dismiss the clone. After about fifteen minutes of crawling through tight spaces he came upon a sobbing child. She was eight or nine and terrified.

"It's all right. I'm going to get you out of here." Naruto carefully took hold of the girl and held her close against his chest. Then he began the long slow climb back up. As he went he kept trying to assure the little girl that it would be all right. He was almost out, he could see Kakashi's flashlight. That was when the roof of the 'tunnel' began to collapse all around him.

"Kakashi!" He cried out as he put his body between the child and the falling rubble, even though he knew it wouldn't be enough. As the

bricks began falling he heard and saw sand come down the tunnel. It quickly solidified around him.

"Is the child all right Naruto?" Gaara called to him.

"Yeah, thanks Gaara!" He quickly crawled the last few feet out. Once he and the girl were safe Gaara recalled his sand and the tunnel collapsed.

"Thank you Gaara you just saved a life." Kakashi looked at Chouji, Neji, Naruto, and even Pakkun. "Good job everyone."

Naruto was busy trying to calm the sobbing child. She was asking about her parents. Naruto had no answer for her. He knew what the odds were that she would ever see them again. He also knew what it was to be an orphan and alone. "Kakashi-sensei I'll take her over to the tents." Kakashi simply nodded, Pakkun was already searching for more survivors.

Still holding her close he got moving. The serious medical cases were being transported to the hospital where Tsunade was over seeing things and working. For less serious injuries a first aid station had been set up in a vacant lot about six blocks from where ANBU headquarters had once stood. There were about a dozen tents filled with cots and patients suffering from everything from concussions to minor burns to broken bones. In the largest tent a dozen medic nins struggled to handle the steady flow of broken and bleeding bodies. The medic nins would either treat them or have them sent on the hospital.

He and the other clones had been bringing people in all night. Entering the main tent he saw some familiar faces. Ino was kneeling over a grandmother with a nasty gash on her head. He thought she might have been on a date as she was wearing an expensive looking light purple dress. There was Sakura in her usual red dress; she was busy too, both with a patient and with directing others. Being a Chunin and the Hokage's apprentice she was the one in charge of the aid station. There was Hinata-chan; her white stockings had

been torn open at the knees. Her blouse was dirty and blood splattered, her face was streaked with dust. Just like everyone else she looked beyond exhausted. Looking up from her patient she sent him a quick, if tired, smile. He returned it and hoped Hinata-chan would be all right.

One of the medic nins was available and waving him over. He was a few years older and a fellow Chunin. Naruto remembered him as the person who beat Neji in the Leaf Chunin exams. He thought his name was Noval. With a tired smile he reached out and took the little girl from him.

"What do we have here?" He asked.

"I pulled her out of the rubble. I just wanted to get her checked."

He nodded. "All right I'll take it from here." He spoke to the child.

"How do you feel dear?"

"I want my mom and dad." She sobbed.

Naruto fled as fast as he could.

By 8 a.m. the sun had been up for a couple of hours. All the shinobi were exhausted and running on a combination of soldier pills and caffeine. Kakashi had been placed in charge of operations at the disaster sight. Kakashi gathered them together and read off about three quarters of their names. "All right everyone. I want to thank all of you for your hard work through the long night and into this morning. We've confirmed beyond any doubt that all the survivors have now been recovered. From this point on our efforts will focus on the removal of debris and bodies. This work remains important but obviously has a lower priority. The shinobi I have named are all dismissed for twelve hours. Get some sleep, get some food, and report back here by 8 this evening." With that the named ninjas began to scatter while the remainder returned to work.

"Hinata-chan!"

Feeling only half awake she slowly turned about in response. Naruto, after an even more strenuous night than she'd had, was *running* towards her. In spite of everything she gave him a tired grin. "Naruto-kun." She knew her face was dirty and her hair utterly disheveled. She took a moment to look at her clothes. They were ruined. Everything she had on was torn and caked with blood and dirt and dust. Naruto's clothes weren't in much better shape, but blood and dirt didn't seem out of place on ninja clothing. "I'm sorry I'm such a mess."

He smiled at her. "Don't be silly Hinata-chan. You always look beautiful to me."

She wasn't used to compliments. Despite all the male attention she'd received in the last couple of years in her heart she remained that shy little girl who was never good enough. She was the girl who had longed for her father's approval and never been able to get it. She had always felt weak and plain and undeserving. But Naruto thought she was beautiful, even when she was a mess. And the really amazing part? He wasn't lying. He meant his words exactly as he'd said them. In his eyes she was always beautiful. Leaning into him she buried her head into his chest and began to sob. "Arigato Naruto-kun."

He wrapped his arms around her protectively. "Are you all right Hinata-chan?"

"No," she admitted. "So many people died and we couldn't do anything." She put her arms around him and squeezed. "I'm sorry that I'm crying Naruto-kun. I know shinobi aren't supposed to cry, I know it's a sign of weakness."

"I don't think that Hinata-chan." With one hand he carefully tipped her chin upward so that she was looking into his clear blue eyes. "Never apologize for your tears Hinata-chan. They're proof of your kind and

gentle heart, and that's what makes you truly strong my Hinata-chan."

Again his eyes didn't lie. She could feel her heart slowly melting. *Her* Naruto-kun thought she was strong and beautiful even now. And if he believed it then it was so. Getting up on her toes she kissed him and moved arms around his neck. He loved her, and so long as he did she knew everything would be all right.

"Sakura-chan!"

A very tired Sakura stopped while making her rounds. She had over four hundred patients in the aid station. Fortunately none of them were serious injuries; all of those were at the hospital. But they were all *her* responsibility. She was doing everything in her power to see to their needs.

Seeing who it was she smiled. "Hi Lee-kun." His outfit was caked in dust; he'd been busy throughout the long night. "Shouldn't you be getting some rest now?" He came over and gave her a small kiss.

"I will Sakura-chan, I will get eight hours of sleep before returning to duty or I will do two thousand pushups." He held out a thermos to her. "However knowing that you would be on duty for some hours I went home and made this for you."

Taking it she unscrewed the lid. The delicious aroma of chocolate struck her and opened her eyes a bit. She gave a look of real appreciation. "Hot cocoa! And I was just thinking that I was wanting some chocolate."

Lee nodded. "I thought you might."

"You are just too sweet." She leaned forward and gave him a small peck on the cheek.

He gave her a smile from what he called his nice guy pose. "You are most welcome Sakura-chan. After all what is a boyfriend for?"

"You really are very good to me Lee-kun, I appreciate it."

"Sakura-chan, I will always do anything that I can for you. Now if you will excuse me I must go home and sleep."

With a wave of her hand she watched him go. *He really is good to me. He listens to what I say, never breaks a promise, acts with loving kindness, and I know he really would do anything for me. Lee treats me better than anyone ever has.* She shut her eyes and let out a deep sigh. *Why isn't that enough?*

The feel of movement in his bed caused him to open his eyes. He was very surprised to see her crawling into his bed.

"What are you doing?" He asked.

"What does it look like lazy?" She snuggled up close to him underneath the covers. "I'm getting some sleep and my favorite spot is next to you."

He grinned at her. "I thought we agreed to never do anything in the house."

She gave him a mischievous grin. "Who said we were going to do anything? After last night I need a good long rest and you happen to be the world's most comfortable pillow."

"Thank you for helping." He said seriously. "Everyone appreciates that you and your brothers were there."

She smiled and pressed herself against him. "Gaara and I both wanted to help, and Kankuro couldn't refuse an order from the Kazekage." She kissed him a bit; she really did sleep better in his arms than anywhere else. She was about to say good night (good

day?) when his hands began to caress a certain part of her beneath her night shirt. "What are you doing?" She asked in surprise.

"Well we *are* in bed together." He said in that playful tone of his.

"We are just going to sleep. Besides," she tried not to sound amused. "I thought you were tired."

"Not *that* tired." He leaned over and gave her a little bite on a specific spot on her neck.

She couldn't help it; a shiver ran through her body. "Damn," and simply from the way she said that one word they both knew she wasn't going to say no. Reaching down he began to pull up her night shirt. "They'll know." She said in a resigned tone. She knew she would regret this tomorrow. But right now she wanted him far too much to try and stop what was going to happen.

"We can be quiet." He pulled the night shirt up over her head and threw it to the floor. She had nothing else on underneath.

"They'll know." She repeated. But he put his lips passionately to hers and pressed his hard body down onto her. She gave in and stopped even pretending to argue.

Downstairs both Yoshino and Shikaku were staring up at the ceiling where a slight and continuous squeaking sound could be heard. The two parents looked at one another.

Yoshino sighed. "Well I suppose we'll have some interesting conversation during breakfast tomorrow."

She let out a sound that reminded him of the purr of a cat that was happily being petted. He let his thumbs dig into her lower back. After a long hot shower they had finally managed to get clean. Now she

lying face down on his bed as he gave her a thorough back rub. Neither of them had bothered with clothes after drying off.

"How does that feel Hinata-chan?"

"Mmmm, wonderful Naruto-kun." She turned her face a bit to look back at him. "Did you learn about this in those books too?"

He smiled and chuckled a bit. "Icha Icha Paradise chapter six, Tako gives the Lady Norella a full body message in order to seduce her."

Hinata gave him a slow smile. "Are you going to seduce me Naruto-kun?"

He gave her a huge smile and a lick between her shoulder blades that made her gasp. "I sure am Hinata-chan." He paused in his efforts. "Are you *sure* it's o.k. for you to be here?"

They had stopped by the Hyuga mansion just long enough for her to pick up some ninja clothing. Then they'd come back here.

Hinata closed her eyes content. "It's fine Naruto-kun. My father would be furious if I were to spend the *night* here with you. But no one will think anything of me spending the *day* with my boyfriend."

"I guess that makes sense." He began to knead her back again. "Hey Hinata-chan can I ask you something?"

"What is it Naruto-kun?"

"I was just wondering, what do you like best about me?"

Inner Hinata had a huge smile and rubbed her palms together evilly. ***Heh, heh, heh, three hours!***

"Your endurance and your refusal to stop until the job is done!" She giggled like mad, and though he asked she refused to tell him why.

In the last two days she had gotten a grand total of about six hours of sleep. Her duties not only as Hokage but as Konoha's top medic nin had kept her moving nonstop for two days. Smothering a yawn she nodded to the people who were attending this meeting. "Do we have the final totals?"

"We have estimates." Kakashi looked as tired as she felt. "Of the 110 members of the various sections of ANBU only 42 have reported in. It seems safe to assume that the remaining 68 died in the blast. Among the dead are Ibiki, and captain Tenzo, both their bodies were identified. ANBU has suffered a crippling loss not only of personnel but of equipment and information. The total casualties we estimate at about 2,200 killed and about 1,200 wounded. The numbers are just our best guesses, it's impossible to know with absolute certainty how many people we lost."

"This has been almost as bad as the Sound invasion. We've lost fewer people but the shinobi we did lose were ANBU, cream of the crop. It'll be quite awhile before we can replace what we lost." Asuma added sadly.

"What has been lost can never be replaced." Tsunade said solemnly. "But we must do the best that we can." She focused on Kakashi. "Speaking of which, what can you tell me about who perpetrated this attack?"

"There is almost no evidence remaining from the disaster sight, the explosion destroyed what there might have been. The same for witnesses. However we do know that the prisoner we captured was a known terrorist who worked with clay explosives he manipulated with his chakra. We also found the body of a murdered ANBU operative whose uniform and mask were missing. Pakkun informs me that he found the scent of Uchiha Itachi at the scene. It seems likely that Itachi was able to enter ANBU headquarters and provide the prisoner with explosive materials."

"The prisoner died in the explosion correct?" Tsunade asked.

"Yes that seems certain." Kakashi confirmed.

"Well that's something, though not nearly enough." She leaned back in her chair. "So far as I am concerned the organization of Akatsuki has committed an act of war against us. I mean to destroy them for this." She frowned. "Unfortunately we don't know where to find them."

"Actually we may have a few leads." Asuma spoke and pulled out a sheet of paper from his folder. "Before the explosion Ibiki conducted a preliminary interrogation of the prisoner. Obviously he didn't know what was coming and thought he would have plenty of time for further sessions. He didn't go in depth but he was able to get the names of a few of Akatsuki's associates. They might provide us with some useful information."

"Good! Asuma I place you in charge of following up those leads. Jiraiya is conducting his own investigation. You'll run this one independently and see what you can find."

"Hokage-sama, I would like to remind you of another matter. During our battle with Sasori he gave us information on a planned meeting with an informant in Orochimaru's organization. That meeting is set to take place in seven days in the village of grass. I would like permission to take my team to follow up this lead."

Tsunade frowned. "Has it occurred to you that Sasori might have been sending you into a trap to avenge his own death?"

Kakashi smiled beneath the mask. "Of course!"

"But you still want to go?"

"I think it's a good bet and worth the risk. Anything that brings us closer to exterminating Orochimaru seems worthwhile."

She considered it. "You'll need to leave in a couple days. Before you do I'm going to examine Sasuke and check on the progress of his chakra and sharingan. With everything that's happened I've let it slip but I don't want him leaving this village again without a thorough examination." She covered up another yawn. "Now if that's all. I have one more meeting tonight."

"Gaara, let me thank you for all the help you and your family have given us during this tragedy."

"You are quite welcome Tsunade-san, we are allies and allies should help each other."

Tsunade nodded in full agreement. "I also thank you for understanding why I've delayed the ceremony."

Gaara shrugged. "You had a legitimate reason. There is no denying you were needed elsewhere."

"Well tomorrow morning we'll have the treaty signing ceremony and make our alliance official."

"Yes, the alliance and one other commitment as well."

An announcement

104

They were on his couch again kissing when the phone rang. Hinata looked at him but he didn't seem to hear it. After the third ring she pulled back from him.

"Naruto-kun aren't you going to answer that?"

"Nope." he tried to start kissing her again but she held back. "What?"

"You have to answer it might be important."

"But..."

"Naruto-kun answer the phone." She said using a rare firm tone.

Sighing he reached over and picked up the phone. "Make it fast." This earned him a frown from his girlfriend. "Oh hey Shika... oh really? When is it?" He listened. "In the morning? No, no way am I getting up that early just to see some dumb signing ceremony." He again paused to listen. "Oh you have got to be kidding. Why would baachan make it mandatory for **me** to be there?" He listened. "What do you mean **you** asked her to?" He frowned as he heard the answer. "If you knew I was going to be troublesome about it why are you even asking me to go to this thing?" The answer was short. "O.k. that makes no sense. I'll understand after the ceremony. I... hey I don't care if I am being troublesome! I just... o.k. fine." With a grumpy look he handed the phone to Hinata. "Shika wants to you now."

Hinata took the phone from him. "Hello? Oh hello Shikamaru. Yes... of course." She smiled at Naruto. "Yes, you can tell Temari I will keep Naruto-kun from acting like a spoiled child." She giggled a bit at his hurt look. "Yes we will see you tomorrow. Yes, good night." She put the phone back down.

"Hinata-chan I sooo do not act like a spoiled child!" He crossed his arms and pouted.

Giggling she leaned into him again. "Of course you don't Naruto-kun." They were soon kissing again."

103

As Tsunade and Gaara went through the process of signing and sealing two copies of the formal alliance Temari sat in her chair nervously tapping her foot. She was sitting to one side of the room with her brother and Matsuri. Looking all the way across there was Shikamaru with his parents. She could also see Chouji sitting with Irmama, Ino sitting with Barlo, Barli, Barla? Her current boyfriend, whom by the way she'd been with 27 days now meaning she was out of the pool. There was Naruto yawning with Hinata next to him. There was Asuma with, surprise, his good 'friend' Kurenai. *Those two really ought to just come out and admit the truth.* Of course as soon as she thought that she snorted. *Oh yeah I'm one to talk.*

"Is something wrong Temari?" Matsuri asked.

She smiled and shook her head. She was very glad that Gaara had *finally* woken up to his own feelings and asked Matsuri to date him. Growing up she had never imagined that Gaara would ever actually have a girlfriend. Now he had managed to find someone who actually cared for him and knew his ways well enough not to get frustrated at his near total lack of emotion.

Kankuro leaned over to whisper to her. "They're getting ready to announce it. Last chance to save yourself."

"From what a lifetime with the man I love?" She whispered back.

He grinned at her. "Come on Temari. Do you really want to spend the rest of your life in a kitchen surrounded by screaming kids?"

"Do I want to be a wife and mother surrounded by my family? More than I've ever wanted anything else."

He looked at her face. "Oh crap! You actually mean it."

She gave him a sweet smile. "It's taken you *this* long to figure that out?"

"Well to be honest I was half expecting him to do something to piss you off enough to kill him."

She shook her head. "I would never kill him. Hit him with my fan a few times..."

"Oh! I think this is it!" Matsuri said excitedly.

Shikaku leaned over to whisper to his son. "This is your very last chance son. Any second thoughts?" His father had a large smirk on his face.

Shikamaru whispered back. "No, and even if I did If I tried calling things off now Gaara would kill me." His father chuckled as if that had been a joke.

Gaara stood up and looked at the few dozen people who had been assembled here. "I would again like to thank the Hokage for her kind words and for her efforts in making this day possible. It is my firm belief that our two villages will prosper and grow if they stand beside and protect each other. And to demonstrate my commitment and sincerity to the friendship of our two proud nations I have chosen to make a blood tie between my clan and the Nara clan of this village."

"Oh!" Hinata gasped and covered her mouth.

"What?" Naruto looked to her in confusion.

Asuma's mouth opened and his lit cigarette fell onto his lap.

Kurenai was gasping and staring.

Chouji began choking on some potato chips and Irmana had to slap his back to help him breathe.

"Yatah!" Ino cried and pumped a hand in the air. She was already thinking of the floral arrangements they would need and what the bouquet would look like.

Shikaku and Yoshino both smiled happily and accepted the congratulations of those near them. Most of the other people in the room were talking eagerly with one another and their excitement was obvious. Everyone in Konoha had known about Temari and Shikamaru of course. But still the announcement had taken everyone by surprise. Still by the sound of things everyone was pleased. Marriages between villages were often made following a treaty signing in order to strengthen the connections between them. But the fact that the Kazekage was giving his own sister to such a marriage was the greatest possible proof of his commitment to the alliance.

"Temari come forward. Shikamaru come forward." Gaara called to them. From opposite ends of the room they came to stand before him. Temari had a huge smile and Shikamaru was looking at her that happy little grin of his. Gaara reached out and took a hold of one of each of their hands. "I hereby formally announce the betrothal of my sister Sabaku no Temari to Nara Shikamaru, and give to them my blessing as both Kazekage and head of the Sabaku clan. They shall be married on October twenty second, the day the groom comes legally of age." He placed Shikamaru's hand over Temari's. "It is done." Gaara intoned, and it was.

As people applauded and offered them congratulations Temari leaned in and kissed her fiancé. "You're mine now, officially!"

Shikamaru smiled. "I wouldn't have it any other way you troublesome woman."

Tsunade had announced a celebratory reception for the happy couple and everyone had made their way there shortly after the announcement. There was food, drink, and music playing. Some people danced, some ate, some hurried to the open bar and got into line behind Tsunade. Everyone congratulated the happy couple. And people talked to each other and made plans.

"I am so happy for you!" Hinata gave Temari a hug.

"Congratulations!" Ino hugged her. "You know I have some ideas about the flower arrangements!"

"Great! You can join me and Yoshino and help us plan, there's a lot to do and not much time. I'd appreciate the help." She looked to Hinata. "I could use your help too Hinata."

Hinata practically jumped up in excitement. "I would be very happy to help!"

Temari reached out and took both of them by a hand. "Listen the two of you are the best girl friends I could ever hope to have. Would you be my co-maids of honor?"

"Yes!" Ino shouted.

"Oh of course!" Hinata squealed happily.

"Listen Chouji, even though it's really troublesome if I'm getting married I'm going to need a best man. What do you say?"

Chouji gave him a face splitting grin. "Hah! I'd love to Shikamaru!"

Suddenly Shikamaru felt a hand fall on each shoulder. He looked up to see Asuma on one side and his dad on the other. They both had on evil little grins. For some reason Shikamaru felt a little nervous.

"Well that's great that you've chosen Chouji to be your best man son." Shikaku said.

"But why don't you leave the arrangements to *us* ?" Asuma spoke right on top of him.

Shikamaru suddenly felt a bit worried though he wasn't sure why. "What arrangements?"

Shikaku chuckled. "Why for your bachelor party of course."

Asuma began to rub his hands together evilly. "I can't wait to arrange the *entertainment*. "

Alarms began sounding in his mind immediately. "Thanks dad, Asuma-sensei, but I don't think..."

"You are *not* wimping out of having a bachelor party son. I refuse to have my own flesh and blood break a sacred male tradition!" Shikaku said.

"That's right it's a time honored tradition and all your male friends expect you to follow it."

Shikamaru paled. "If Temari finds out the sort of things that happen at a bachelor party I'm not going to live long enough to get married."

His dad smiled wickedly. "Son, that's a risk we're willing to take."

"Why do you look so worried Shikamaru?" Naruto asked him. "Not having second thoughts all ready are you?" Naruto grinned at him.

Shikamaru shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous I can't wait to make Temari my wife and start working on having two children a girl and

then a boy." He shrugged. "I'm just hoping I live long enough to marry her."

Naruto looked alarmed. "Why do you say that? Has baachan assigned you an S-rank mission or something?"

"Naruto I wish it were something that safe!" Seeing Naruto's confused look Shikamaru shook his head. "Don't worry about it."

"Listen Shikamaru I wanted to ask you something. Did you decide to ask Temari to marry you or did she sort of force you into it?"

"It was mutual Naruto, and if you're wondering if I was forced into this I wasn't. If I could marry her today I would."

Naruto looked at him in surprise. "But *marriage* it's a huge step aren't you worried?"

Shikamaru glanced to where his dad and Asuma had their heads together plotting. "Not about the wedding."

Naruto looked over to where Hinata was talking with Ino and Temari and Yoshino. "How do you know though? How can you be sure you want to marry someone?"

Shikamaru could see where he was looking and grinned. "It's easy Naruto. Think about her and ask yourself if you would want to live the rest of your life without her. When I was in Suna I nearly lost Temari for good. And when I thought about what it would be like to never be with her again, I knew. If she is someone you can't imagine not being with then you know she's the one."

Slowly Naruto nodded. "Thanks Shikamaru."

"No problem, what's a friend and a Chief Advisor for?"

After many congratulations and about three hours Shikamaru and Temari were alone on the dance floor getting ready to leave in a bit.

"Uhm, honey there's something I need to tell you and I don't want you to get upset."

She smiled at him. "Your friends want to throw you a bachelor party."

He looked at her in panic. "Uhm how did you..."

She laughed. "Your mom told me they probably would."

"Are you angry?"

She shook her head and continued to smile. "Of course not!"

He looked at her in relief and a good bit of surprise. "So it's o.k. with you if I have a bachelor party?"

She nodded happily. "Shikamaru I would never deny you any of your traditions; even if they do involve drinking, ogling half naked dancing girls, and pretty much behaving like a pig in heat. I'm fine with it and do you want to know *why* I'm fine with it?"

He was afraid, very afraid. "Uhm why?"

She gave him a sweet smile. "Because I know that you know that if I find out you've touched another woman with even one finger I will beat you with my fan until you are nothing but a huge wet spot on the carpet."

And the scariest thing was that she never stopped smiling or dancing with him.

Live in the moment

103

Tsunade looked at the results of the medical examination and sighed. This morning she'd been celebrating Shikamaru's and Temari's wedding announcement. Now in the afternoon she was going to have to give a patient some very unwelcome news. She sighed, life was like that. You always had to take the good with the bad. Well there was no point in putting things off. With her clipboard in hand she went back into the examination room. Sasuke looked up from his seat.

"So when will I be able to use my sharingan?"

She took a deep breath. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"Kakashi-sensei." Naruto called out.

Kakashi looked up from the book Naruto had given him. "Naruto? What's up? I wasn't expecting to see you until we set out on the mission tomorrow."

"Yeah." He was rubbing the back of his head. "Listen Kakashi is there somewhere we can go and talk in private?"

Kakashi lifted his one visible eyebrow. "Well that sounds serious."

"Uhm, well there's just something I want to ask you about."

"Does it have anything to do with the mission?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, it's uhm... personal."

"Well that definitely sounds interesting." He headed down a different side street. "Come on I have a place we can talk in private."

Naruto looked about the spacious if somewhat messy living room. "I like your house. Why didn't you ever invite me over before?"

"Well if you had been in the village over the last two and a half years perhaps I would have. In any case would you like a beer?"

"Really?" Naruto asked excitedly. "You'll let me have one?"

Kakashi chuckled and went to his fridge. "Naruto if you're old enough to fight and kill a member of Akatsuki you're definitely old enough to have a beer." Coming out of his kitchen he handed Naruto a beer and then sat down at the other end of the couch. "So what did you want to talk about?" Kakashi opened his own beer and took a drink.

Naruto was staring at him. "Kakashi-sensei your face!"

"What about my face?"

"I can see it!" Naruto said, and stared at him as though he were a science experiment. "I've never seen it before!"

Kakashi sighed and wished it were possible to drink beer through a mask. "I'm glad I'm able to entertain you so easily. Now I believe you wanted to talk to me about something?"

Naruto looked a bit nervous. "Kakashi have you ever been in love?"

Kakashi smiled. (Naruto found it bizarre to be able to see his teeth.) "Oh so it's like that is it?"

Naruto frowned at him. "Are you going to make fun of me?"

Kakashi signaled for him to relax. "No, of course not!" He chuckled again. "I'm actually flattered you would come to me for this."

Naruto shrugged. "Baachan is busy; Iruka is out of the village, so is ero-sennin and I don't know I want to ask him about this anyway, so I decided to give you a try."

Kakashi sweat dropped. "Naruto you really need to learn how to take a compliment." He sat back and took another sip. "So you want to know if I've ever been in love?"

Naruto nodded. "Yeah, have you?"

Kakashi slowly nodded. "I've been in love once. It was with the girl on my Genin squad. Her name was Rin and she was a medic nin."

"What happened?"

"She died." He answered quietly. "She was 16 and she died on a mission to Wind country."

Naruto nodded sadly. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago Naruto, and she was ninja like you and me."

"So how long did you two date?"

Kakashi shook his head sadly. "Rin and I never dated. It's one of the many regrets I have in my life."

Naruto immediately thought about how things used to be with him and Sakura. "Did she not feel the same?"

"Actually she was in love with me for a long while before I returned her feelings."

Naruto looked at him confused. "Then why didn't you ever date her?"

"It was complicated Naruto." Kakashi shut his eyes and remembered. He was surprised just how strong the feelings still were. "My best friend Obito, who was also on my Genin squad, was completely in love with her. He died saving me life. From that time on whenever I'd think about asking Rin to be with me I'd feel guilty. As though I were somehow betraying Obito's memory. And then she was gone and it was too late." Kakashi picked the beer back up and took a deep pull.

"I'm very sorry you never got to date her." Naruto said seriously.

"Naruto what is this about? I presume it has something to do with your relationship with Hinata."

Naruto sighed. "Shikamaru and Temari announced they were getting married this morning."

"Really? I hadn't heard, that's great I'm sure they'll be very happy." Kakashi smiled, (again with teeth.) "And their engagement has suddenly got you wondering about the future with Hinata?"

Naruto nodded. "I love Hinata-chan with my entire heart and I know she loves me. She makes me very happy and I can't even imagine being with anyone else. But even though we love each other we really haven't dated that long. We only dated for a few months before I left and since I've gotten back. I don't know if it's too soon for me to be thinking about marriage."

"Naruto," Kakashi spoke seriously. "I can't really tell you anything about marriage and very little about dating. But something I do know about is how precious time is; especially for shinobi. You know just how dangerous our lives are. Despite your youth you have already seen plenty of death. The only advice I can give you Naruto is this; don't ever delay something you truly want just because you think you should be a little older. We are ninja, we live in the moment. The ordinary rules don't apply to us."

"Thanks Kakashi-sensei, that helps." Naruto finished his beer and got up to leave.

"Anytime."

"I'll see you tomorrow at the gate." Naruto left with a great deal to think about.

Sasuke stared up at his bedroom ceiling. It took all his will power to not start screaming and smashing up his furniture. He had spent two and a half years getting beaten on by Lee and Guy, running with weights until his legs were ready to drop off, and doing all those stupid D-ranks pulling weeds, walking dogs, and painting fences. And for what? What had he gone through all that effort for? To be ordinary? He gritted his teeth as he remembered what Tsunade had told him. She was acknowledged the world's top medic nin so he didn't even have the hope of thinking she didn't know what she was talking about. Her words rang in his ears over and over again. Not just her diagnosis but her ridiculous attempt to assuage him. 'There is nothing stopping you from becoming a fine ninja with a good career. There's no reason to think you won't make Chunin soon.' As though that were his goal! So he could still be a *fine* ninja and have a *good* career. What did that matter? An ordinary ninja wouldn't last five seconds against Itachi! Everything he'd done had still been aimed at killing his older brother and avenging his family. The path had changed but the goal never had. *I need more power! That what it always comes down to.* He had to find the power to destroy Itachi no matter what it cost. Well the curse seal was gone. Jiraiya had managed to completely remove it; he was a hell of a lot better at seals than Kakashi-sensei would ever be. So just how was he supposed to get the power to defeat his brother? He wracked his brain trying to find some possible way. And as he lay on his bed drowning in depression he thought of a conversation he'd had with Guy and Lee perhaps a year ago. Hmmm, could that possibly work? Sasuke thought about it for a moment.

"Maybe." He said quietly.

"You wanted to see me Tsunade?" Naruto asked as he walked into her office.

She smiled at him. Here was another of life's good moments again. "You're calling me Tsunade. Are you feeling sick or do you want something?"

Naruto scratched the back of his head. "Well there was something I was wanting to ask you about."

"Well let me just take care of this and then we can talk." She held out an envelope to him. "Here open this." She had a huge smile. "I think you're going to be very happy."

He took the envelope and opened it. There was a single piece of paper inside. Pulling it out he saw it was a check. "What's this?"

Tsunade answered in a cheery voice. "It's a check for all the bounties that were outstanding on Sasori."

Naruto unfolded the check and looked at it. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. "Three and a half million?!" He stared at Tsunade. "Is this a joke?"

Tsunade smiled and shook her head. "Not at all Naruto! Sasori was a very bad man and he'd had a very long career. That check represents the total amount of all his outstanding bounties. Congratulations on your good fortune in becoming a millionaire." There was a twinkle in her eyes. "Though I'd suggest you hold off on buying any property in the village until your birthday."

"Why?" he asked weakly. He felt kind of numb.

"Oh I just think some properties may come available at that time."

"Is this real?" He asked her still not believing it.

"Naruto that check is absolutely real. As of right now all your money problems are over." She smirked. "Just don't get into the habit of gambling."

He looked up from the check and stared at her. He looked absolutely terrified.

"What's wrong Naruto? I was expecting you to be shouting and dancing about now."

"Tsunade," he asked in a low nervous voice. "Do you believe omens? You know signs from Kami something really important is about to happen in your life?"

Tsunade nodded. "Yes I absolutely do. The day before you and Jiraiya showed up I went on a serious winning streak and I just knew something big was coming."

Naruto nodded. "I've been thinking about something really important since this morning."

"What?" Tsunade asked curiously.

Naruto took a very deep breath. "I've been thinking about asking Hinata to marry me."

"Oh!" Almost instantly she was at his side hugging him. "That's wonderful!"

He looked at her surprised. "So you don't think it's too soon?"

Tsunade shook her head emphatically. "No I don't! Naruto if you love her and you want to make her your wife don't hesitate! If the two of you were ordinary teens then I would advise waiting. But you are both ninja. Time is precious and you shouldn't worry so long as your heart is sure she is the one you love."

Naruto nodded. "I love Hinata-chan more than I love ramen!"

Tsunade smiled. "Not the most romantic sentiment I've ever heard but I can see it's heart felt."

"You know Tsunade you and Kakashi both gave me the same advice."

"I think you'll find most older ninjas would." She went on a bit sadly. "We have all lost people in our lives. It's almost impossible to be shinobi and not have. If you love someone you should do everything

in the world you can to be with them." She laughed. "I'm sure if you ask Shikamaru and Temari they would certainly agree."

Naruto slowly nodded. He thought about the Third and about Haku. Time was precious because you could never know just how much you had. "All right I've decided! I am going to ask Hinata-chan to marry me!" He declared loudly.

Tsunade applauded. "Wonderful!"

Suddenly Naruto seemed to deflate and looked a bit worried. "Uhm, Tsunade, how do I do that exactly? I mean Hinata-chan is in a really formal clan. I don't want to do anything that will get her dad mad at me. Can I just ask her or is there a special ceremony?"

"Well if you want to do things properly there *is* a certain way." She grinned and took hold of his arm. "Come on I'll be happy to help."

"Really?" He sounded relieved.

"Trust me Naruto I wouldn't miss this for the world!" Now first we'll have to run by the bank to get that check cashed. Then we'll have to go by the jewelry store. Then..." Tsunade was extremely excited she really felt like a mother trying to help her son.

"Father what is this about?" Hinata asked. She had just been summoned to his study and told she was going to attend a meeting.

"I really do not know daughter. I simply received word from the Hokage that she and Naruto-san wished to speak with the two of us."

"Naruto-kun is meeting with us?" She suddenly panicked and wondered if her life had been too perfect for too long. "He's not in any trouble is he?"

Hiashi looked at her calmly. "None that I am aware of. Though I do not know the reason for this abrupt meeting." He looked his daughter over carefully. "I must say I am looking forward to finally meeting him."

The doors to the study opened and some servants ushered the Hokage and Naruto in and then closed the doors. Hiashi and Hinata both offered Tsunade a bow. "We are most honored to have you here Hokage-sama."

Naruto quickly bowed to Hiashi, while Tsunade gave a slightly more formal and graceful one. "I thank you for receiving us."

"And may I ask the reason for this unexpected visit?" Hiashi inquired politely.

Grinning Tsunade spoke in a careful and formal tone. "Noble Hiashi-san, as you know Uzumaki Naruto has no parents and so I have come to act as his guardian and to discuss with you a matter of greatest import. For it is matter involving the blood and honor."

Hiashi looked very surprised. Hinata gasped and covered her mouth with both hands. Hiashi looked carefully at Naruto. Naruto felt himself shrink a little under his gaze. When Hiashi spoke it was addressed to Tsunade.

"I see. Has he come in all honor?" Hiashi spoke formally.

"He has." Tsunade replied

"Will he accept the decision of my clan?" Hiashi spoke.

"Only if your decision is to let me be with Hinata." Naruto spoke up.

Tsunade looked at him in shock. "Naruto! I thought you wanted to do this properly?"

Naruto sent her an embarrassed look. "I am sorry Tsunade but if I agreed to that it wouldn't be honest." He turned to Hiashi and bowed

to him again. "Hiashi-san, I love your daughter with all of my heart. To me she is my most precious person. I want very much to have your approval. I promise you that I will always love Hinata-chan, that I will do whatever I can to make her happy, and that I will never ever hurt her. I promise this and I never go back on my word, for that is my nindo."

Hinata felt tears come to her eyes and her heart began to beat like a trip hammer. Never in her life had she been happier than in this moment. "Naruto-kun I love you too, with all my heart." For once she did not care what her father thought as she embraced him and held him tight.

He put his own arms around her and held her close. Even as he held her he looked pleadingly at Hiashi. "Hiashi-san please give me permission to marry your daughter I love her too much to be without her."

"What would you do if I were to refuse my permission?" Hiashi asked curiously.

He held Hinata a little tighter. "I would marry her anyway. Even if we had to leave this village forever."

"Naruto!" Tsunade said sharply. "Do not say such things."

Hinata looked into his eyes. "But Naruto-kun if we did that you could never be Hokage! What about your dream?"

Naruto smiled at her and all her worries melted away. "It doesn't matter Hinata-chan. You are more important to me than my dream. Being Hokage wouldn't mean anything if you weren't there to share it with me." He very gently caressed her cheek. "I would give up being Hokage for you Hinata-chan."

"Really?" She said in a small voice.

"Really Hinata-chan."

A tiny grin touched Hiashi's lips. "Well I would not want to deny Konoha its future Hokage or my daughter a husband who is ready to become a missing nin in order to marry her. You have my permission to marry my daughter."

Naruto, Hinata, and Tsunade all let out a sigh of relief. Tsunade looked over to the happy couple who were still wrapped up in each other's arms. "You know Naruto you still need to ask her." Tsunade said with a grin.

"Right." Naruto reached into one of the pockets of his Chunin vest. He pulled out a small box. Opening it he revealed a huge 3 karat ring. "Hinata-chan would you..."

"YES!!"

Hiashi actually chuckled to see his daughter so completely excited and happy. "Very well let us go to the family chapel. I will perform the betrothal ceremony and make this official."

Once the betrothal was complete the young couple was given some privacy. Hiashi in the meantime spoke with Tsunade alone in his study. "I cannot say that this was completely unexpected. However I had not thought he would broach the subject until after his inheritance."

"Well the wedding announcement by Shikamaru and Temari seemed to have gotten him thinking and he came into some money today which he took as a good omen."

"He came into money?" Hiashi asked. "Have you..."

Tsunade shook her head. "No, he must wait until he is sixteen to inherit. The money I was referring to was from bounties. He has just collected three and a half million ryu."

Hiashi nodded though he did not seem impressed. "A tidy sum. Though nothing compared to what he stands to inherit."

He pulled his lips back and looked at his fiancé with just a little sadness. "I have to leave tomorrow on a mission."

She nodded. "I know Naruto-kun." She gave him an understanding look. "This is the life of a ninja. I can stand being away from you for awhile if we are on missions, just so long as I know you are coming back to me. If I ever lose you I won't want to live."

"Don't say that Hinata-chan!" He pulled her back into his arms.

"Why not Naruto-kun? It's the truth."

"Hinata-chan my life is full of danger! If something were to happen to me..."

She silenced him with a kiss. "If anything happens to you Naruto-kun then I am not long for this world. I told you that I was yours, and I am. If you go to the next life I will follow you there before long. That is a promise. There is no place in this world for me without you."

"Hinata-chan..." Naruto felt trapped by her promise. He didn't want to die knowing it meant she would die to. But he couldn't ask her to break her nindo.

She smiled understanding his dilemma. "If you want me to live then you better have a long and healthy life." Seeing he was about to argue she put a finger over his lips. "Please let's not argue. You are leaving in the morning, but right now we are here together. Let's live in the moment and leave tomorrow for tomorrow. Kiss me Naruto-kun."

And he did. He kissed her and decided to live in the moment, and wish that tomorrow would not come.

Late departure

"I do not believe this!" Sakura fumed. She checked her watch. "It's 8:15, where is he?"

"Calm down Sakura." Kakashi said in his usual non-chalant way. "I'm sure Naruto has a good reason for being late."

"Oh come on sensei! For once you're on time and we're late because of Naruto! I mean I thought he'd grown up some but no! He pulls a stupid stunt like this!"

"Relax Sakura, once a dobe always a dobe." Sasuke said with a serious look.

Sakura continued to fume as five minutes later she finally spotted Naruto coming towards the gate. He wasn't alone, Hinata was hanging on his arm and smiling up at him and he had one of his ridiculously big grins. Determined to give her teammate a piece of her mind she stormed up to him. "What's the big idea in being so late baka?! What are you trying to be Kakashi now?"

Naruto gave her a big smile and laughed. "I'm sorry Sakura-chan I was having breakfast this morning with Hinata-chan and I just kind of lost track of the time." The fact Naruto didn't seem to even be bothered by her anger made Sakura want to grind her teeth.

"I'm very sorry Sakura-chan it's really my fault. I insisted on making breakfast for my Naruto-kun and I kept him there much too late." Hinata spoke up.

Sakura shook her head. "Hinata you can't keep covering for Naruto he's going to have to learn about responsibility and keeping your commitments. I mean..." Being a girl Sakura suddenly noticed it and gasped. "Hinata! Is that an engagement ring?"

Giggling Hinata happily held her hand out to show it off. "Yes it is!" Hinata declared joyously. "Naruto-kun proposed yesterday and I accepted. We're getting married!"

"Ahhhh!" Sakura shouted and jumped for joy. "That's wonderful! Oh congratulations!" She hugged both of them.

"Thanks Sakura-chan." Naruto said happily.

"Thank you!" Hinata said. "Sakura would you like to be one of the brides maids?"

"Yes I'd love to! When is your wedding?"

Naruto scratched the back of his head. "Oh we haven't decided yet. It'll be soon though; neither of us wants to wait long."

Hinata nodded eagerly. "It will be some time after October tenth. That is Naruto's birthday and when he comes of age. We have already decided *not* to marry on that day as obviously too many people have bad memories and we want the wedding date to be one with no bad connotations."

Sakura nodded understanding. "Naruto how did you afford such an engagement ring? It's huge!"

Naruto looked embarrassed. "Well I came into some bounty money for killing Sasori."

Sakura frowned at him. "Naruto! You didn't spend it *all* on the ring did you? I mean it's beautiful and a girl really appreciates a man spending money on it, but have you thought about the future? Do you have money to at least afford a down payment on a house? Or do you just expect Hinata's family to help there?"

Naruto looked embarrassed. "I still have money left over Sakura-chan."

She crossed her arms. "How much?"

"A lot ."

"And how much is a lot?" Sakura demanded to know.

Hinata giggled. "My Naruto-kun doesn't want to brag, but he's a rich man now! The bounties were worth over three million ryu."

"What?!" She stared at Naruto clearly not believing it. "Naruto you're a millionaire?"

He nodded embarrassed. "Yeah Sakura I am."

"Naruto you are so treating us all to a nice dinner when we get back from this mission. And *not* ramen!"

"Oh Sakura," Kakashi called sweetly. "Now that Naruto is here we're waiting on you now."

"Oh! Kakashi-sensei, Sasuke Naruto and Hinata are engaged now! They're going to get married!"

Kakashi smiled. "Congratulations Naruto I am very happy for you!"

Sasuke actually managed a small smile. "Good going dobe. I'm just amazed a girl would actually say yes."

Naruto chuckled. "Yeah I am definitely lucky to have such an amazing girl love me." He looked at her and sighed a bit. "I guess I really have to go now Hinata-chan."

She nodded. "Of course. Unless I happen to be on a mission I will be right here when you get back." They shared a kiss and he headed to the gate with Sakura. Team seven was soon on the move flying through the trees.

"Hey teme, I need a best man. What do you say?"

Sasuke smirked. "Well dobe I guess *someone* has to do it. You do know of course that as best man I'm responsible for your bachelor

party?"

Naruto blushed. "Ah, actually Sasuke I think I'd really rather not have one. I don't think Hinata-chan would really like it and I don't want to do anything to upset her."

"Good for you Naruto-kun!" Sakura put in.

"Yeah, great, but you're having a bachelor party dobe, get used to the idea."

"But..."

"It's a sacred male tradition. You don't want to offend all your male friends do you?" Sasuke asked.

"Well, no."

"Good it's settled then."

Sakura shook her head. *Men!* But she did smile over at Sasuke. "You know Sasuke don't you think it's really romantic that Naruto just up and decided that he wanted to spend his whole life with Hinata and just proposed to her out of the blue?" She blushed a bit as she looked at her dark haired teammate. "I know as a woman I would sure like that."

Sasuke looked at her. "Are you sure Sakura?"

She felt her blush got a bit deeper and she nodded eagerly. "Oh yes I definitely would."

Sasuke smirked. "All right, next time I see Lee I'll be sure to tell him how much you would enjoy a surprise proposal."

"No!" she shouted.

It was nine in the morning and Shikamaru yawned. "I hate these early morning missions."

Asuma smiled at his favorite one time student. "Nine isn't that early Shikamaru."

"I can't believe Temari isn't joining us." Ino said.

Shikamaru shrugged. "Well Gaara and his party will be leaving as soon as the Sand ANBU squads arrive to escort him. She wants to spend as much time as she can with them before they go."

"They will be back for the wedding though?" Ino worried.

"Of course." Shikamaru confirmed.

"I'm not surprised she's not coming." Chouji mentioned. "This is just a C-rank and she usually doesn't bother joining us for those."

Shikamaru stared at his sensei. "Asuma you look different. Did you get a hair cut or something?"

"Nope."

Shikamaru stared at him for a bit then snapped his fingers. "Hey! You don't have a cigarette in your mouth!"

"What?!" Ino said in shock. "Well I'll be he doesn't!"

Asuma grinned. "I've decided to give up smoking."

"YOU?!" All three of his former students exclaimed.

Asuma chuckled. "Trust me I have my reasons."

"Care to share them with us?" Shikamaru asked. They had spent a couple years pleading with him to quit and finally given up.

Asuma smiled. "Not just yet." With that he leapt away and was quickly followed by his team.

A shovel dug into the soft earth and tossed it aside. The man looked at his partner with disgust and loathing. "Why are two elite ninja like ourselves performing such vile and loathsome manual labor?"

His partner sent him an exasperated look. "Stop bitching or I swear I'll kill you."

The first man shook his head. "Kill me? Like that's a f#king threat you piece of s#t. Please do, that would at least get me out of this."

"Just shut up and keep digging."

"Why don't we round up a couple people and make them do this s#t for us?"

"Because finding people, dragging their asses back here, and threatening them into working would take longer than just doing it ourselves."

"But at least we wouldn't have to be f#king doing it!"

"Listen do you want to back to the leader and tell him we were delayed in reporting in because you didn't want to shovel a little?"

"Fine." He put his shovel back into the soil. "But I still say this is way beneath our dignity. It's beneath the dignity of any f#king ninja. Never mind *us*."

"A real ninja does whatever is necessary to get the job done. *Without* bitching about it."

"Whatever," he grumbled but continued to dig.

"Hello." Hinata called out.

Temari looked up as both Yoshino and Hinata walked into the kitchen. "Hey Hinata, thanks for coming over today. Right now Yoshino and I are planning out the reception and can use your help."

"No problem," she said happily. "But I have an announcement I want to make first." Without ceremony she held out her hand.

Temari jumped to her feet. "Is that an engagement ring?"

"Yes it is!" Hinata answered happily. "Naruto-kun proposed yesterday and I accepted!"

"Oh my dear that's wonderful!" Yoshino exclaimed.

"Congratulations!" Temari declared. The women shared hugs and further congratulations. As was a bit natural Hinata and Temari compared their rings.

"Wow! That is quite a rock. I see Naruto didn't scrimp. It's certainly a lot bigger than the one Shikamaru gave me yesterday."

Yoshino sent her soon to be daughter in law a look. "Is there something *wrong* with your ring dear?"

Temari swiftly shook her head. "Oh no! I love it!"

"Well that's good dear." Yoshino said flatly. "Considering it was *my* ring, and has been in the Nara clan for five generations."

Hinata smiled. "Naruto-kun wanted to give me the best most expensive ring he could find. But I wouldn't have cared if it were made of tin. I am just so happy he wants to marry me."

"Have the two of you set a date yet?" Yoshino asked.

Hinata shook her head. "No, not yet. Naruto is on a mission right now. We'll decide on one when he gets back. But we both want it to be soon. It will just have to be sometime after October tenth when he comes of age."

And the most wonderful idea in the world struck Temari like a thunder bolt. "Hinata!" She gasped out. "Why don't we have a double wedding? The four of us can all get married together on Shikamaru's birthday!"

"That's a wonderful idea!" Yoshino said.

Hinata stared at her in shock. "Are you sure? I mean I don't want us to cause trouble with your own wedding."

Temari smiled one of her big smiles. "What are you kidding? We're making all the plans now. It would be no trouble at all to make it a double wedding, especially since Naruto and Shika have many of the same friends. And this way Gaara can definitely attend your wedding. Otherwise he might not be able to leave Suna for it. Plus later on you'll have me and Shikamaru there to remind your husband about your anniversaries."

Hinata slowly smiled. "It sounds like a wonderful idea, but I can't commit to anything until I talk to Naruto."

Yoshino smiled knowingly. "That's fine dear. Go ahead and start making the plans for a double wedding. When he comes back show him all the work you've already done and I'll guarantee you he'll agree to it."

Hinata looked at Yoshino and felt just a little uncomfortable. "Isn't that just a bit deceptive."

Temari laughed. "Consider that your very first lesson in how to be a wife."

The women went ahead and began to plan for a double wedding.

" S#t. "

"You can say that again."

They were both looking down at a slightly decayed corpse. From the pictures they had been provided there could be no doubt who it was in the grave they had just dug up.

"Nii Yugito, the jinchuuriki that held the two tails demon. Looks like those f#king villagers were telling the truth. Looks like she has been dead a week. So what the f#k do we do now?" Hidan asked.

Kakuzu shrugged. "We tell the leader and he'll decide."

"All our f#king work these past years has all just gone to s#t you know that don't you?"

Kakuzu sighed. "Well we can't do anything about it here. Let's go."

The two Akatsuki members were gone.

A favor

Orochimaru was in a good mood. A secret had come in for Kabuto specifying a meeting place and time. The Leaf ninjas had kept Kabuto's death quiet and apparently Sasori's wasn't quite good enough to have learned of it. He had deliberately kept up the ruse in the hopes he might have an opportunity like this. As he contemplated that someone entered his private quarters.

"Ku, ku, ku and how did it go my apprentice?"

Orcinus gave him a huge smile. "It was harder than I thought, but I finally killed her and took her chakra."

"I see." He eyed him carefully, with a bit of disappointment. "I sense no change in you."

Orcinus touched the hilt of his sword. Immediately his chakra seemed to fill the room. "The two tails chakra is mine now."

Orochimaru smiled. "That sword of yours is quite something you know. With it you can wield the chakra of the biju with out suffering all the unfortunate drawbacks of being a jinchuuriki. I dare say the Akatsuki would love to get their hands on it."

Orcinus shrugged. "It would do them no good. The sword is bound to me; no one else can use it. In anyone else's' hands it is merely a metal blade. When I die the sword will break and the chakra within it will be lost forever."

"Yesss." *I would not have believed that had you not allowed be to wield your sword and try to use its special ability. Oh well, your body and your sword will be mine soon enough.* "There are still a few other biju for you to capture. Then you will have the nine tails."

Orcinus had a far away look in his black eyes. "Is it true the nine tails holds more chakra than all the other biju combined?"

"Oh, yes, the chakra it holds is nearly infinite." Orochimaru was also dreaming what he could do with that kind of power.

Orcinus bowed to him. "Orochimaru-sama, thank you for telling me of the biju and locating them for me."

Orochimaru turned to leave. "You are quite welcome my apprentice."

"Good bye."

The sword went through his back and punched out his chest. "Aucckk!" His mouth filled with blood. *You dare attack me! I am Orochimaru the immortal! I'll crush you like a worm!* That was what he wanted to say but his mouth was flooding with blood. Instead he tried to take the fool's body. But to his horror his chakra was draining away and he could not work his body transfer jutsu.

As though reading his mind Orcinus spoke teasingly. "I am very sorry Orochimaru-sama. But while I do appreciate all the aid you have given me these last two and a half years I have no intention of giving you my body in payment. With my sword in you it is impossible for you to work any jutsus. So I fear this is the end." He laughed. "But don't fear, I'll take good care of the Sound village and the organization you built."

Orochimaru wanted to curse him but his strength was fading and his vision was growing dark. *No! No! No! I am immortal! I cannot die! I am...*

Two guards were ordered to Orochimaru's private quarters. When they arrived they were horrified to see the body of their master lying in a pool of blood while his apprentice was calmly going through his desk.

Orcinus looked up from the desk and grinned. "Take that garbage away and burn it. Then let everyone know there is a new Otokage."

The two guards looked at one another, then slowly bowed to their new master. "Yes Otokage-sama."

Orcinus's smile widened. That had a good sound to it.

It had taken a couple days to arrange a meeting. In a dank cavern the members of Akatsuki were assembled. With the two recent losses and the promotion of Tobi to full membership they were one man down. Hidan and Kakuzu were the only ones there in the flesh. The rest were present only as ghost like images.

"Very well we are all here now." One of the images with rings in his eyes spoke. "Let us here your report. Each of them cut off the other and interrupted to tell what they had found. They finally got the information out though.

"So what the f&#k do we do now? Huh?" Hidan demanded.

"Nothing has changed." Their leader said calmly.

"What the f&#k do you mean nothing has f&#king changed?! Did you not f&#king hear us the two tails is f&#king dead!"

Their leader continued to look calm and unaffected. "We shall continue to harvest the remaining biju. We shall put them to an alternate use."

"What alternate use?" Kakuzu asked.

"I shall find one. We have come too far to be halted now. I refuse to give up on my dream." The leader replied.

"You have no idea do you?" Itachi spoke in an equally calm and serene tone.

"I will find some new use for the chakra we have collected have no doubt."

"You disappoint me Pain." All eyes were suddenly on Itachi's image. The leader did not like being addressed by name. "When you first recruited me I found your vision of an ultimate weapon and the uses it could be put to truly visionary. I truly believed you a man of genius and imagination. But it seems I was mistaken. When faced with difficulty rather than find a dynamic solution you shut your eyes and carry on as before."

"Everything is still possible. I will find a way to achieve our final goal."

"I do not believe you will. Therefore I am leaving this organization. I have no wish to kill any of you so please let our parting be amicable."

The leader shook his head. "There is no leaving once you join. If you are not my friend then you are my enemy."

"Then I am your enemy." Itachi's image disappeared.

"Kisame," the leader said calmly. "You are there with him. Kill Itachi."

Kisame gave their leader a sharky smile. "Kill Itachi?" he seemed to think about it. "Naaah, consider this my two week notice. Ciao!" His image blinked out.

"Hey!" Tobi spoke up. "Since we have three openings now can I nominate someone?"

Everyone ignored Tobi. "S&#t! So what now fearless leader?"

"Does anyone else wish to leave?" The leader paused but no one took him up on it. "Very well I have new assignments for you. Listen carefully..."

"Are you certain you wish to continue as my partner?" Itachi asked.

"Sure," Kisame chuckled. "I think we make a good team and I've actually had more fun with you then I can remember. So what do we do now?"

"For the long term I have no idea." Itachi said simply. "For the immediate future we will hide." They discarded their Akatsuki robes but kept their rings.

97

"Did we get here on the wrong day?" Naruto growled. They were in some bushes looking at Kakashi standing on the bridge. He was henge into Sasori. (Since they never saw him wearing his regular puppet form the henge was of a red haired youth in a robe with red clouds.)

"Quiet!" Sakura barked at him.

Sasuke sighed. "Sakura you're being louder than Naruto is."

She flushed in embarrassment.

They saw Kakashi lift his hand. "There's the signal!" Naruto shouted and they all flew to the bridge to their sensei's side. "Where is he?" Naruto asked excitedly.

Kakashi dropped his henge. "It's over I'm declaring the mission a failure. Let's head back home."

"We're just giving up?" Naruto couldn't believe it.

"Naruto," Kakashi said patiently. "The meeting was to take place at noon. We've been here four hours and no one has come. Maybe Sasori was playing some kind of final joke with us. Maybe something happened to the agent. And maybe he saw something he didn't like

and was able to leave unnoticed. In any case there's nothing more for us to do here."

"But why don't we at least search the area?" Naruto asked.

"Who would we be looking for Naruto? If we happen to spot someone do we interrogate them? How would we know who the spy is or even if he's within fifty miles?" Kakashi asked reasonably.

Naruto frowned. "So all this has been for nothing?"

"Pretty much." Kakashi sighed.

"I could have been with Hinata-chan this whole time!"

Sakura immediately bopped him on the top of his head. "Baka! You've got the rest of your life to be with her now. Look at the bright side we got out of the village for a while and we were all together on a mission just like the old days!"

Naruto slowly smiled. "I guess you're right Sakura-chan. It was kind of fun being all together on a mission again."

"Did you have fun Sasuke-kun?" Sakura asked with a little grin.

He shrugged a bit. "It wasn't too bad. I did like getting out of the village for awhile."

Sakura turned back to Naruto. "And just so you know you are *still* buying all of us a nice dinner!"

96

They managed to get a couple hundred miles south of the grass village before setting up camp. As was standard procedure when outside the village they each took a two hour watch. Sakura had the next to the last watch and gently shook Sasuke awake in his sleeping bag. She saw those amazing dark eyes open and look up at

her. And all the intervening years seemed to disappear. She felt like a shy awkward little eight year old again. *Oh Sasuke-kun why must I love you so? How can I ever make you love me?*

He sat up quietly. "Anything to report?" His tone was all business the way it always was.

She shook her head. "No nothing," She let out a little sigh. "I'll see you in a couple hours." As she got up to go to her sleeping bag his hand took hold of hers.

"Wait Sakura-chan. I need to ask you something." His whisper was quiet and gentle and there was something about it that made her heart beat faster.

He is holding my hand and he called me chan. "Wha... what is it Sasuke-kun?"

His eyes looked intently into hers. "I need a favor Sakura-chan."

"Wha... what so... sort of favor?" Her face was darkening. Inner Sakura had her own ideas. ***YES!! Sasuke is sick of being a virgin and needs me to make him a man!! Yes Sasuke! Yes! I'll do ANYTHING you want me to!***

"Sakura-chan I really need your help with..."

She heard what he wanted and her heart sank. "Sasuke-kun I can't do that! It would be wrong and it would be deceitful!" She whispered.

He gave her a shy little grin and one hand gently touched her cheek. He was leaning very close to her. "Please Sakura-chan it's really important won't you please do this for me?" His lips were right near hers and he spoke to her in a breathy whisper. Suddenly his hands were around her waist and he had pulled her down onto his sleeping bag. She could feel his weight on top of her and she was staring into his eyes.

"Sasuke-kun what..." And then he did it. He leaned down and his lips touched hers. It was what she had wanted, what she had hungered for since the first time she saw him. His lips were soft and warm and his kiss amazing. ***YES!! I KNEW IT!! TRUE LOVE WINS OUT!!*** Inner Sakura had to stop for air as she was hyper ventilating.

He pulled his lips back and she opened her eyes again. She was happier than she could ever remember being. "Will you help me Sakura-chan?"

"Yes Sasuke-kun, I'll do what ever you want." He smiled and leaned in to continue kissing her.

Sasuke found himself really enjoying the kissing. Enjoying it far more than he thought he would. But he never let his mind leave the plan. With her help it would begin to move forward. He would keep kissing her for awhile and make sure she would have no second thoughts later.

A sacred male tradition

92

Team seven made it back to Konoha without incident. Though Kakashi and even Naruto noted that Sakura seemed to be acting a little weird. She had *always* played up to Sasuke; asking him for dates and trying to get his attention. But as they returned home she seemed barely able to put two words together around him. It was as though she was suddenly transformed into a younger Hinata trying to talk to Naruto. As for Sasuke he treated her with the same mix of indifference and acceptance he always had. Kakashi had tried to find out if there was a reason for this sudden change but Sakura refused to say. Once they were back in Konoha Naruto immediately went searching for his fiancé while Kakashi ordered Sasuke to join him for a special task. Sakura was forcibly left alone as Kakashi informed her she could not join them.

Team ten made it back to Konoha after a frustrating and rather unrewarding mission. Of the people they had gone out to find all but one they had tracked down. But the information they provided on Akatsuki proved frustratingly vague and unreliable.

"All right, we'll check on the last name on our list later. For now you're all dismissed." Asuma told them. He quickly departed, eager to find out the details on a certain project.

"I don't need any help with this." Sasuke grumbled.

"Oh come now Sasuke," Kakashi said cheerfully. "There's nothing wrong with asking for aid from your fellow leaf nins. We are all on the same side afterall."

"I don't need help." Sasuke repeated.

Kakashi sighed. "Wouldn't the results be better by combining our efforts rather than splitting them? And if you get help *you'll* have to spend a lot less of your own time on this."

Sasuke considered that. "Hn."

"Wonderful! So glad you agree!" Sasuke sent him a sour look but didn't actually argue.

They soon arrived at their destination, 'The Copper Cellar,' a bar in the poorer section of the village. Sasuke turned up his nose a bit as they entered. Seeing their fellow leaf nins sitting at a back table the two of them approached them.

Shikaku and Asuma looked up as they approached. "Kakashi, Sasuke, this isn't your usual haunt. What are you doing here?" Asuma asked.

"Well Sasuke here was wondering if you could help him with something." Kakashi said.

Sasuke sent him a flat look. "This was your idea."

"You're the one in charge Sasuke. You should be the one to ask."

"Ask what?" Shikaku inquired.

Sasuke let out a sigh. *The things I do for that dobe.* "I was wondering if you would mind helping me with Naruto's bachelor party."

The two Jonins shared an amused look. "Sasuke, I think we can do something for you." Shikaku said with a wicked smile.

91

Naruto was as happy as he could be. He had gotten to spend most of the day with his Hinata-chan. She had come over and made him dinner. Now they were on the couch making out. And the absolute

best part? She had brought an overnight bag with her. Now that they had been betrothed her family would turn a blind eye to their activities.

Between kisses he asked her again. "You're sure you won't get in trouble if you stay the night Hinata-chan?"

She giggled and nodded. "I'm sure Naruto-kun, since we're engaged now no one will say anything. Are you all right with us sharing a wedding with Shikamaru and Temari?"

He nodded and kissed her. "My Hinata-chan just so long as you're there and say yes I'll be happy."

They started kissing again and they were slowly getting to the point where they go to his bedroom when there was a knock at the door. He sent her a pleading look. "Do I have to answer that?"

She sighed; she didn't really want to be disturbed either. "Yes you do Naruto-kun, it would be rude not to."

He regretfully let go of her and got up off the couch to open the door. "Kakashi-sensei, teme, what are you doing here?"

With a smirk Sasuke grabbed his left arm. "Let's go dobe."

Kakashi grabbed his right arm. "We're kidnapping you Naruto." Kakashi had one of his big hidden smiles.

"Hey! I don't want to go anywhere!"

"You're not getting a vote dobe."

Hinata was at the door in a flash looking at the two who were trying to steal her fiancé away from her. "What are you doing?" She demanded to know. "Leave Naruto-kun alone! He doesn't want to go."

"We're sorry about this Hinata," Kakashi said. "But I'm afraid we have no choice."

Sasuke actually managed a slight chuckle. "It's a sacred male tradition. We're bringing him to his bachelor party."

"But I don't want to go to a bachelor party!" Naruto whined. "I want to stay here with Hinata-chan!"

"Too bad dobe be a man!"

"But I don't want to be a man!" Naruto pouted.

Kakashi shook his head. "Naruto we would be failing you as friends and as fellow men if we didn't force you to do this. Anyway I'm sure Hinata doesn't mind. Do you Hinata?"

"Actually I'd much rather he didn't..."

"See she's fine with it." Kakashi said.

"Let's go." Sasuke said. Together he and Kakashi leapt away with a firm hold on Naruto.

Hinata was left standing at his door as the three of them were quickly gone. She hurried to the phone knowing who she needed to call.

Shikamaru was in the middle of a game of shogi with Temari when his dad and his sensei came in and each put a hand on one of his shoulders. "It's time boy, let's go." Shikaku sounded almost giddy.

Shikamaru frowned. "Go where?"

Asuma grinned. "We're kidnapping you and taking you to your bachelor party."

"Oh really?" Temari crossed her arms and sent Shikamaru a sweet smile. "Is that so?"

Shikamaru felt the blood drain from his face. *Geez! Do they **want** her to kill me? Saying that right in front of her.* "Actually that sounds way too troublesome, and besides I want to live."

"Sorry boy, it's a sacred male tradition and I'm not letting you break it."

"You'll thank us for this when you're older." Together he and Shikaku hauled Shikamaru to his feet.

"That's if I live to get older." Shikamaru was looking nervously at the girl he loved. She was giving him a dangerous look.

"Oh it's o.k. Shikamaru go and have a good time. And don't worry about the fact that I could walk into your room while you're asleep and suffocate you with a pillow." She sounded like she was joking but Shika knew better. He loved her and wanted to be with her always. That didn't mean she didn't scare the hell out of him at times.

"Well there you have it!" Shikaku said pleasantly. "Thanks for being so understanding daughter!"

"We promise to have him back before sunrise." Asuma said. The two were carrying him to the door. They had reached it when a shout split the air.

"HOLD IT!!" Temari shouted and was on her feet. "I thought I would be all right with this, I really did. But I've decided that I'm not. Shikamaru you are NOT going!"

"Temari," a calm voice called from behind. "Whether you like it or not this *is* a tradition. We have to let the men in our lives have a little fun or else they become joyless." Yoshino said calmly. "Do you trust Shikamaru?"

She was startled by the question and who was asking it. "Of course!"

"Are you certain of his love for you?" Yoshino asked patiently.

"Yes!" She clutched at the Nara's Heart that she always wore.

"Do you really believe he would ever betray you?"

Temari slowly shook her head. "No, I suppose not."

"Then what is the matter?" She asked kindly. "You should let him go and simply wait here with patience and good grace."

Temari was surprised to hear this coming from Yoshino of all people. She let out a sigh. "I suppose you're right."

Seeing their chance Shikaku and Asuma got going. Temari stood there and watched them go.

Letting out another sigh she turned to Yoshino. "I don't believe this."

"I know dear." She patted her shoulder. "It's for the best. This way Shikamaru gets to have one wild night and get it completely out of his system. Looking back I'm sure you'll realize accepting it is for the best."

"So how did you manage to just sit still all night while he was out drinking and staring at dancing girls?"

"Oh I didn't." Yoshino said. "When Inoichi and Choza came over to kidnap him I gagged and tied him up and kept him in my closet all night."

"WHAT?!" Temari shouted. "But you said I should wait here with patience and good grace!"

Yoshino nodded. "That's right *you* should. I never said anything about me. Besides Shikamaru is my *son* I don't want him to be tied up in a closet all night. Want some tea dear?"

Temari just looked at the woman and felt betrayed. She wondered if she could catch up to them and beat them down in a fight to get Shikamaru back. Right then the phone rang. Feeling annoyed she

picked it up. "What?" She barked. "Oh hey, listen I can't talk right now Shikamaru was just kidnapped by his dad and Asuma." She listened for a bit. "You do? What?" As she listened again she began to grin. "Ino! You're a genius! I'll be right there."

Chouji was just heading out the door. When Ino and a boy around their age approached him.

"Chouji-kun!" Ino called. "Are you headed off to Shika's and Naruto's bachelor party?"

"Ino-chan!" Chouji felt a little panic. "Uhm, yes I am."

Ino smiled and walked right up to him leaning in close. "Chouji-kun could I ask you for just a tiny little favor?"

"Ino I can't bring you with me or tell you where it is!"

She looked shocked at the very suggestion. "Oh Chouji-kun I know that. I don't want to go. But I was wondering if you could bring Keitaro with you." She nodded to the boy standing behind her. He looked utterly ordinary. He had short black hair, brown eyes, glasses, was about five feet and skinny, and had on plain ordinary clothes. He looked like a future accountant. He was definitely not the rugged good looking type Ino usually went for.

" *He's* your boyfriend?" Chouji asked.

"Oh Chouji don't judge by looks! Keitaro has never been to one of these and he wants to go."

"And you're o.k. with him going?"

Ino grinned. "Of course I am! I mean if it's safe for Shikamaru and Naruto it must be safe for him too."

"I don't know..."

"Oh pleaaaaase, for me with sugar on it?" She was giving him the puppy dog eyes and he knew he had no chance of saying.

He sighed. "All right."

"Thank you Chouji-kun." She gave him a kiss on the cheek and he immediately blushed. "You're the best!"

"You like her don't you?" Keitaro asked as they were walking.

Chouji looked alert. "You mean Ino?" Keitaro nodded. "Of course I like her! Her, me, and Shika practically grew up together. She's a dear friend and teammate."

"That's not the sort of like I mean."

Chouji frowned at the boy. "You don't need to worry I'm no threat. She doesn't like fat guys. Besides I have a really great girlfriend. Irmana and I have been together for three years and she has never complained about how I look."

Keitaro nodded. "I'm sure that's so. But you still like Ino don't you?" He didn't seem the least bit jealous or upset.

Chouji frowned at him. He honestly didn't see what this guy had going for him that would make Ino like him so much. "Look, don't take this the wrong way, but you're probably only going to be with her a few weeks. So don't waste your time worrying about me. Just be very happy you get to be with someone like her. And be nice to her or me and Shika will make you regret it."

Keitaro smiled. "Right."

The Copper Cellar was packed with men drinking talking and laughing. On a number of the tables beautiful scantily clad young girls were gyrating about as men cheered and offered them ryu

notes. At one of the tables a certain white spiky haired ninja was writing madly with one hand and waving notes in another. Outside the door two poor signs had been posted announcing the bar was closed for a private party. Other signs announced that no wives or girlfriends were permitted. Shikaku had an empty sake cup in his hand and was refilling it from a small bottle. The two guests of honor were both staying clear of the girls so far. Naruto was sticking close to Sasuke while Shika was leaning disinterestedly against a wall. Well, they would get an introduction to at least one beautiful lady soon enough. Shikaku grinned like a mad man as he sucked down another shot of sake. This *almost* made up for his having to spend his own bachelor party tied up and gagged in Yoshino's closet. He was near the door and saw as Chouji entered with a young boy he'd never seen before. A wicked grin appeared. He hurried over to where Asuma and Kakashi were. He grabbed each and in turn whispered some information to them. He pointed to the uninteresting looking boy. The three of them eyed him like a pack of hungry wolves eyeing an unsuspecting deer.

On a roof top across from the Copper Cellar Ino, Hinata, and Sakura eyed the bar.

"Byakugan!" Hinata activated her blood line limit.

"Well?" Sakura asked nervously.

"Give her a minute." Ino said.

"But I want to know what Sasuke-kun is doing!" Sakura said in frustration.

"I've spotted them!" Hinata announced.

"What are they doing?" Sakura asked.

"Nothing so far." Hinata answered nervously. "Naruto and Sasuke are at the bar. They're having a beer. Shikamaru is just standing

there sort of watching."

"Typical," Ino said. "He probably thinks it would be too much trouble to actually do anything."

"Why are you even here Ino?" Sakura asked. "You're not worried about Shika are you?" She grinned. "Or are you worried about a different boy?"

Ino frowned. "I'm here to support Temari and Hinata and help them. Anyway I notice you haven't even mentioned Lee, you know, your *boyfriend*?"

Sakura blushed. "I trust Lee I know he won't do anything."

Ino smiled knowingly. "And if he did you'd probably just use it as an excuse to break up with him guilt free." Sakura glared at her best friend.

"There are a bunch of girls dancing on tables." Hinata said sounding depressed.

"Well it's a bachelor party. How is, 'Keitaro' doing?" Ino spoke.

"Well..."

Keitaro had spotted Shikamaru and was heading that way. The plan was simply to deliver the message and then try to just blend into the background.

"Hey there." Keitaro suddenly felt a firm hand upon a shoulder. "I saw you walk in here with Chouji. I'm Nara Shikaku.

Keitaro stiffened a bit. Running into Shikaku was not part of the plan. Offering a weak smile Keitaro replied. "I am Urshima Keitaro, Ino's boyfriend. She asked Chouji to bring me over with him."

Shikaku laughed. "That Ino! What a wild one! You know most girls would never want their boyfriends to attend on of these things, never mind help them attend. I mean it almost sounds like she sent you here just to spy on us." Shikaku sent the boy a wicked grin. "Silly thought right?"

"Right!" Keitaro tried to laugh.

Shikaku casually put an arm around Keitaro's shoulders in a very friendly gesture. "You know the only thing worse than a guy spying for a girl would be if a girl tried to come in here disguised." Shikaku's grin got wider and sharper. "You know what we do to girls who get caught doing that?"

Keitaro swallowed. "What?"

"Oh we strip them naked and throw them out." He laughed.

Keitaro blushed. "That's terrible!" Shikaku eyed him curiously. "Uhm I mean it's terrible that we don't do more."

Shikaku laughed. "I like you Keitaro, come on lets get you a drink. It's an open bar tonight!"

"I'm not really a drinker." Keitaro protested.

Shikaku chuckled. "Time to get you started then." Keeping an arm around his shoulders Shikaku guided Keitaro away from where Shikamaru was and towards the bar instead.

"So you ready for your big moment dobe?"

"Huh?"

Sasuke chuckled. He thought the beer was loosening him up just a bit. "You do know what's going to happen to Shikamaru and you tonight right?"

Naruto looked pale and nervous. He had read Jiraiya's books and heard his stories. A few of them involved bachelor parties. "The chair?"

Sasuke grinned. "That's right, you had better enjoy it! Because after this you just get one girl for the rest of your life."

"That's plenty so long as the girl's Hinata-chan." Naruto took a deep breath. "Sasuke you're my best friend right?"

"Unfortunately."

"Sasuke I need a favor." Naruto leaned over to whisper to him.

Sasuke frowned. "Naruto you are such a wimp! Do you know what people will say tomorrow?"

"I don't care. I only care about what Hinata-chan will say." Naruto said stoutly.

Sasuke shook his head. "You really are in love huh dobe?"

"Yeah I am."

Sasuke sighed and got up from the bar. "All right, let's go use the bathroom."

Naruto got up as well and put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Thanks Sasuke."

"Sure, but don't touch me."

Sasuke slouched towards the door while Naruto returned to the bar to order another beer.

"Going somewhere Sasuke?" Kakashi asked as his student approached the door.

"Hn, this is boring. I think I'll go home and brood for awhile."

Kakashi chuckled and spoke quietly. "Say hello to Hinata for me."

Sasuke stiffened and got moving fast. Kakashi watched him go with a laugh.

"Oh thank Kami!" Sakura said with relief as Sasuke exited the bar.

"Yeah!" Hinata cried out.

"Why are you so happy?" Ino asked.

"That's not Sasuke that's Naruto!"

"What? No way!" Sakura said.

"I'm sorry Sakura but it is; now I have to go. I need to get back to his apartment before he does. I am **sooo** going to reward him for this."

"But..." Sakura tried to protest but Hinata was gone. "Great now what?"

Ino laughed. "We wait for Keitaro."

Keitaro was near the bar with Shikaku simply unable to get away.

"So Keitaro, are you a breast or ass man?"

Keitaro began to choke on the beer. After a bit a gasped response came. "What?"

Shikaku chuckled at the obvious discomfort. "Breast or ass which do you like more in a girl?"

Keitaro turned a shade of light red. "Uhm, breast I guess."

"You guess? You don't know?"

"Oh, uhm, definitely breast. Yes I just love breasts; I can't get enough of them."

"So how many women have you had?"

"What sort of question is that?" Keitaro said sharply.

Shikaku grinned. "The sort of question men ask each other all the time. You a virgin?"

Keitaro was trying to come up with an answer to that when someone came over.

"Say dad I was wondering." Shikamaru froze as soon as he spotted Keitaro. "Dad! This is..."

"Keitaro, Ino's boyfriend and latest victim." Shikaku leapt in. "Have the two of you met?"

"No we haven't." Keitaro managed to slip out of Shikaku's hold and stand up. "Shikamaru Ino's told me so much about you I feel like I know you already. I hear you have an amazing woman as your fiancé."

Shikamaru sent Keitaro a flat look. "Yeah, Temari is an amazing girl. She's always surprising me."

A loud shout got everyone's attention. "All right! Mitarashi Anko is here and now the party can *really* start!" A scary looking woman in a trench coat entered the bar to some wild cheers and cat calls.

"Who's first?"

In short order a space in the middle of the bar was cleared and a single chair set up. With surprisingly little resistance Naruto was gotten over to the chair and sat down in it. He had a tiny smirk on as Anko approached him still wearing her trench coat.

"I remember you from the exams." Anko said with a nasty little grin. "You have sweet tasting blood. Mind if I have a taste while I make you into a man?"

Naruto leaned back and relaxed. "Do what you want just try not to leave any bruises."

Everyone roared with laughter including Anko. "No promises!" She dropped her trench coat to reveal she was wearing nothing but fishnet. She immediately straddled him and began to move her body against his.

Keitaro looked on with horror at what was happening. Everyone else was crowded around cheering wildly even Shikaku. Keitaro looked to Shikamaru who was looking right back rather than at the entertainment.

"I bet you can't wait for your turn huh?" Keitaro asked dryly.

Shikamaru shrugged. "Not really but my dad kind of expects me to do it and so does everyone else."

Keitaro took a deep breath. "Look Shikamaru I sort of came here to give you a message from Temari."

"I can imagine." Shikamaru took a deep breath as well and prepared himself. "All right go ahead and tell me what horrible things she is going to do to me."

Keitaro's head shook. "No, no threats. Temari just wants you to know that she loves you and knows that she can trust you." Keitaro let out a sigh. "Since the very first time she was with you she hasn't even thought of anyone else. She has never even thought of looking at another man because you are everything to her. She just wishes she was everything to you."

Shikamaru grinned. "She is." He said quietly. "And just between us guys. Whenever I look at another woman I match her up to Temari and they all pale in comparison." He yawned. "It's late and staying here would be too troublesome. I'll see you around Keitaro, it was nice meeting you." With everyone looking at what was happening to Naruto no one but Keitaro saw Shikamaru simply walk out of the bar.

"Looks like Shikamaru is leaving early too." Ino pointed out.

"Unless it's someone with a henge." Sakura pointed out.

"Nope, I recognize the slouch that's the genuine article." Ino said decisively.

Sakura smiled at her friend. "Well then aren't you going home now? I mean Shikamaru and Naruto have both left so there's no reason for you to still be here. Unless you're worried about someone else."

"I'm waiting for Keitaro to leave it would be rude not to and besides I want to hear all about it." Ino said.

"Sure, and I suppose Chouji being in there has nothing to do with it." Sakura teased.

"Shut up forehead girl." That just got a laugh from Sakura.

Keitaro had waited just a couple minutes to let Shikamaru get out of sight before heading for the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Shikaku took hold on Keitaro's left arm.

"And where's Shikamaru?" Asuma asked as he got hold of Keitaro's right arm.

"Shikamaru decided he was tired and decided to go home." Keitaro said happily.

Shikaku chuckled. "I *knew* that boy's survival instincts would kick in." He smiled at Asuma. "You owe me a hundred ryu."

"I know." Asuma grumbled.

"Actually if you don't mind I think I'd like to go home too." Keitaro yawned.

Shikaku and Asuma shared a look. "Oh I'm afraid we can't let you go yet." Shikaku said.

"Nope," Asuma agreed. "Not until you've enjoyed the full experience." The two of them began dragging him to the front of the crowd.

"That really isn't necessary!" Keitaro said in a panicked voice.

"Oh but I insist!" Shikaku replied.

Anko finally got off of him and was smiling at the poor boy. 'Naruto' was sitting there jacket open, hair a mess, and with a huge grin on his face. He wasn't moving.

"I think you killed him!" Someone in the audience shouted.

"What a great way to die though!" Someone else shouted which led to a loud peal of laughter.

Naruto finally managed to get to his feet and stagger away from the chair he'd occupied for the last twenty minutes. "The things I do my friends." He said in a happy daze.

"All right now where's the other one?" Anko yelled. "Bring Shikamaru out here!"

"I'm afraid Shikamaru snuck out." Shikaku announced to a loud round of boos. "And everyone who had a bet with me I expect to see your money before you leave." There was another round of boos. "Anyway Anko we have your next customer right here." He and Asuma planted Keitaro down in the chair. He gave the lad a happy grin. "You love breasts right?"

"What?" At the moment poor Keitaro was too terrified to think straight.

Shikaku laughed. "You lucky guy you're in for a real treat."

As Shikaku spoke Kakashi went over to Anko and whispered something to her. As Anko listened an evil look (well eviler) covered her face and she nodded. She strode over to where Keitaro was and straddled him pressing her body against Keitaro's he hands were running through his short black air. "Well I guess you'll have to do. So are you ready for a *real* woman?" And without allowing for any possible reply Anko planted her mouth atop her customer's and sent in her tongue.

Five seconds later.

"Aaaaaccck!!" Keitaro shoved Anko off and with surprising strength and speed forced a way through the crowd and out the door.

Shikaku and Asuma were both laughing so hard they thought they would die.

"Oh!" Asuma finally managed to talk again. "I can't believe that was Temari!"

Shikaku was still trying to stop laughing. "Well I can't believe that after all our training together she wouldn't know that Shika and I could spot her chakra signature with our eyes closed."

"So what are you going to say to her tomorrow?" Asuma asked.

"Nothing." Shikaku said.

"Nothing?"

"That's right, I'm sure she'll *never* admit it and so long as she doesn't I won't say anything."

"What happens in the bachelor party stays in the bachelor party huh?" Asuma said.

"That's right." Shikaku agreed. "Oh and by the way," he pointed to a fat balding man over near the bar. "See that guy?"

"Yeah?" Asuma asked. The guy was a total stranger.

"That's Kurenai."

"What?!"

Outside the bar Keitaro disappeared in a puff of smoke to be replaced by a panting Temari.

Ino and Sakura jumped down to the street. "So what happened?" Ino asked eagerly.

Temari blushed. "Nothing! Nothing happened!"

Ino and Sakura both frowned. "What do you mean nothing happened?" Ino demanded.

"Nothing happened! And now if you'll excuse me I'm going home to see my loving *faithful* man." She left and promised herself she would never, ever talk about this again.

Deceptions and secrets

90

It was about three in the morning as Choza and Chouji stumbled home. For Choza this was nothing new, he'd had plenty of late nights out with Inoichi and Shikaku. For Chouji though it had been a new experience.

"I'm proud of you son." Choza stated.

"Thanks dad." Chouji said as he helped hold his father up.

"Don't tell your mother."

As the two of them approached the Akimichi household they spotted a certain female waiting outside.

"Uh oh, looks like you're in trouble son. Whatever you do don't tell her the truth." Choza said.

His son looked at him in surprise. "Dad you want me to lie?"

"Son I want you to live through this and keep your girlfriend." He suddenly spoke up. "Irmana dear so good to see you, aren't you out a little late though?"

"Not as late as the two of you. If you don't mind Choza-san I'd really like to speak to Chouji alone."

Choza whispered. "You're on your own son." Then stumbled to the door.

Chouji grinned at his girlfriend. "Hi honey."

Irmana stood there with her arms crossed. "I heard you went to Shika's bachelor party tonight."

Chouji blushed a bit. She had to be really angry. Normally Irmana *never* confronted him directly on things. She preferred the subtle approach. "Yes I did."

"Well since you're getting back so late you must have had a good time."

"I had fun." He admitted.

"Fun? And just what sort of fun kept you in a bar until two in the morning?" Irmana asked sharply.

She was angrier than he could ever remember. "You know just uhm, partying."

Irmana strode up to him and he automatically took a step back. "And did any of this partying involve half naked dancing girls rubbing themselves against you?"

He swallowed. He knew he would regret this but he didn't want to lie to her. "Yes." He said meekly.

"WHAT?!" She exploded.

"It was just once! All the older guys sort of forced me to."

"Oh I'll just bet! And I'm sure you hated every second of it!" Irmana shook a bit. "Damn it Chouji why do you want some money grubbing dancing girl to touch you? Why don't you want *me* ?"

"But I do want you!" He was shocked to hear that and quickly put his arms around her. "Honey I *love* you! I'm so sorry if what I did tonight hurt you. I swear I will never do anything like that again!"

She stared up at him. "You lo... love me?"

He looked at her in alarm. "Honey you know I do! What happened tonight was nothing! It doesn't change how I feel about you. I love you."

Irmana shut her eyes and leaned forward into him. "Say that again Chouji-kun. Please say that to me again."

"I love you. I love you." Chouji took her face in a single strong hand and tipped it up towards his. "Don't you know how very much I love you?" He looked into her green eyes and saw surprise there.

"Chouji... I love you too." She said thickly.

"I know you do honey." He leaned in and kissed her. At first she stiffened, but soon relaxed and returned his kiss. As their lips touched and pressed eagerly together he could hear soft moan come from her. He held her a bit tighter and began to kiss her more passionately. When their mouths pulled apart he whispered her name. "Irmana."

She stiffened again and drew away from him. "I'm sorry. Oh I'm sorry Chouji. I shouldn't have come here."

"What's wrong? Are you still mad because of what I did at the party?"

"No," she shook her head and backed away from him. "I'm not mad at you."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing's wrong Chouji. I just shouldn't have ever come here." She gave him a fragile smile. "I'll tell you what. This was a mistake. Let's pretend it never happened. Don't ever bring it up. If you do I'll pretend not to know what you're talking about." She turned around to leave but stopped after just a couple steps. "Chouji before I go can I ask you something?"

"Anything honey."

She took a deep breath. "What do you think of Ino?"

"Is that what's wrong?" Chouji sighed. "How many times can I answer this? I care about Ino. I won't deny that she's special to me. I won't deny that for a long while I wanted her to be my girlfriend. But I don't feel that way anymore."

"You sure?" Irmana said weakly. "Not even a little bit?"

He shook his head forcefully. "No those feelings are gone now. Ino and I will never be anything more than good friends."

"Well that's good to know. Good night Chouji. I'm sorry I bothered you." She ran away ignoring his confused calls.

A couple blocks away she finally stopped running. She dropped her henge and stood revealed as herself. She took a couple deep breaths to try and slow her heart down.

"Oh kami why am I so stupid?!" Ino cried out. Still feeling a bit shattered she leapt up to the roof tops and tried to get home as fast as she could.

89

"Naruto, there's something I've been wanting to talk to you about." Kakashi said after practice.

"What is it Kakashi-sensei?"

"It involves trying to perfect the rasengan."

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked.

"Well you know that my sensei spent three years developing the rasengan right?"

"Yeah, ero-sennin mentioned it a few times. So?"

"Well Naruto it just so happens that sensei hadn't finished developing it at the time of his death. He hadn't achieved its final form."

"What do you mean? I mean it seems pretty complete to me." Naruto sounded just a bit interested.

Kakashi smiled. "Well sensei was a wind type just as you are. He had plans to add a wind element to it. He felt it would *massively* increase the destructive power of the jutsu."

"How massively?" Naruto sounded very interested.

Kakashi chuckled. "How about I tell you about it over some ramen?"

He did not have to ask a second time.

Asuma was over at the Nara household as he so often was. And as was usual whenever he was over he was being annihilated in shogi. This particular time his slaughter was at the hands of his favorite former student.

"I've got a mission lined up for tomorrow." Asuma mentioned as he tried desperately to find some way to save his king.

"What sort of mission?" Shikamaru moved a gold general to set up the end game.

"You remember that one name on Ibiki's list that we missed?" Shikamaru nodded. "Well we just got a report that he has returned home." Asuma moved a lance forward and took out one of Shikamaru's pawns.

Shikamaru played a bishop. "So we're going out to get just one guy?" Asuma nodded. "So how long is this supposed to take?"

"Just one day." Asuma frowned down at his remaining pieces. He didn't like his options. "We go there, arrest him, and bring him back here for interrogation. A basic C-rank, it should only take a few hours. We should be back in time for lunch." He finally moved his king away from the approaching bishop.

That was exactly what Shikamaru had expected him to do. He moved his knight and put Asuma out of his misery. "Checkmate."

Asuma sighed. "It figures you'd end things with your knight. You know I've often thought you're a lot like the knight. Your not that powerful but you can move and strike in surprising ways."

Shikamaru grinned. "I'm a knight huh? I like that."

"A knight?" Temari asked. "I've always thought of you as a pawn myself."

"Troublesome woman." Shikamaru muttered. "Asuma who will be on the mission?"

"The old squad." Asuma answered as he pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his vest. "And maybe a couple more just to make sure he doesn't get away from us." Frowning Asuma put the cigarettes back.

Shikamaru looked over at Temari. "You want to come with us?"

But she shook her head. "No, Yoshino and I need to talk to the caterer tomorrow about the orderbs."

Shikamaru shrugged and turned back to Asuma. "Want to play one more?"

Asuma shook his head. "No thanks, you've crushed me three times and that's enough for one evening." He grinned. "I *will* beat you one of these days though."

"Anything is possible." Shikamaru thought about the odds of being hit by a meteorite. "Asuma-sensei there's something I've been

wanting to ask you about."

"What?"

"I notice that you're still not smoking it's been two weeks now."

Asuma had a proud smile. "I know, it's the longest I've gone without a cigarette since I was 15."

"You still haven't said *why* you've stopped."

Asuma stood up and stretched a bit. "No I haven't." He headed for the door. "I'll see you at the gates tomorrow at 9 sharp."

"Hello Lee-kun."

Lee came to an immediate halt and a huge smile filled his face. "Sakura-chan! It's so good to see you! It has been awhile since you have come to on of my training sessions."

Tenten whispered to Neji. "Yeah, not since *Sasuke-kun* stopped training with us." Neji smirked and nodded.

"Yosh Lee!" Guy shouted. "Warm Sakura's soft heart with the fire's of your youth!"

"Guy-sensei!"

"Lee!"

"Guy-sensei!"

"Lee!"

" Lee !" An exasperated Sakura called out. "Are you done with training for the day?"

"Yes Sakura-chan."

"Great. Can we go for a walk?"

"Of course Sakura-chan!" He extended his arm to her. She gingerly took it and they headed off together.

As soon as they were out of earshot Tenten turned to Neji. "What do you think?"

"She is obviously nervous, uncomfortable, and under the weight of some great emotional pressure." Neji replied.

Tenten nodded. "Good! Maybe she's finally ready to come clean with Lee and admit she doesn't really care about him."

"One can only hope." Neji agreed.

Originally they had not been a close unit. But over time the three of them had developed a powerful bond based on trust, mutual respect, and friendship. Neji and Tenten had recognized Sakura's true motivation from the start and had tried to warn Lee. Tenten had used subtle hints while Neji had been his usual blunt and direct self. But they had both been motivated by the desire to spare their friend the pain of a broken heart.

"Yosh my students!" Guy declared. "Have faith that true love will win out!"

Neji and Tenten shared a look and shook their heads.

"Lee-kun I need to ask a *very* big favor of you." Sakura said nervously.

"Anything for you Sakura-chan!"

She looked into his trusting face and took a deep breath. "The favor isn't really for me it's for Sasuke."

Lee's face fell. "Oh."

Sakura reached out and took a hold of his hands. "Lee-kun I am asking you to go to Sasuke and help him in any way he asks. I am not sure what he needs but please do the very best you can to give him what he wants."

Lee looked at her silently and she could see how badly she had just hurt him. "I understand Sakura-chan." He pulled his hands out of hers. "You really would do anything for Sasuke it seems, just as I would do anything for you."

Sakura flinched at the accusation in his voice. He had a right to doubt her too. Inner Sakura spoke up. **Lee has been so good to us! How can we do this to him? Hey! Sakura thought. Whose side are you on? You know how much we love Sasuke and this is for him! So that makes it all right? You didn't complain when Sasuke was kissing us so don't complain now!** With that Inner Sakura remained quiet.

Lee turned away from her. "I cannot deny you anything Sakura. If this is what you truly want then I will go to Sasuke and offer him whatever help I can."

"Thank you Lee! It really means..." He leapt away from her in mid sentence.

Sasuke answered the door and invited Lee in.

"Sakura asked me to help you in any way possible." Lee said.

Sasuke nodded. "Thanks Lee I do appreciate it."

Lee sighed. "I am doing this for Sakura not for you Sasuke. I think I already know what you want, but tell me anyway."

"Lee," Sasuke spoke in a serious tone. "Tell me how to open the Inner Gates."

A tragic death

"Why are we wasting our time like this?" Hidan complained.

Kakuzu sighed; his partner really was a religious zealot and first rate pain in the ass. "I told you we're going to collect a bounty before we go after our target."

"Well hopefully this one is alive at least." Hidan said.

"Well he'd better be. I don't want to even know what our leader would say if the nine tails was dead too."

"Pein and Konan decided to go after the three tails themselves right?"

Kakuzu nodded. "If they can take the three and we can get the nine that will put things back on track."

"Bull s#t!" With Itachi and Kisame gone and the two tails dead everything is a mess. Our so called ultimate goal is probably impossible to reach now."

"Who cares?" Kakuza said. "We don't need all the biju to make boatloads of money! Akatsuki can become wealthier than any ninja village and that's plenty for me!"

"What about Itachi and Kisame?"

Kakuza shrugged. "Again, who cares? I'd be happy to just let them go, but I guess Pein will take care of them eventually. Any way it's not like we lack applicants their spots will get filled up quick."

Hidan frowned at him and shook his head a bit. "It's all about the money for you isn't it. With that sort of attitude you're sure to end up in hell."

"So? As long as I can make money down there as well I don't care where I end up. Any place where you're rich can be paradise."

"Infidel."

"Zealot."

F#k you.

Kakuza sighed. "Come on lets go, sooner we take care of this the sooner we can get paid and move on to the real mission."

"Hurry up and finish your breakfast Shikamaru you don't want to be late do you? Yoshino asked.

He drank the last of his tea. "It's fine mom there's plenty of time."

"Well if you have so much time you can help me do the dishes."

Shikamaru looked at his watch. "Well look at that. I guess I'd better hurry and be going." Shikaku chuckled as his son got up from the table.

"Have a good mission honey." Temari stood up as well and gave him a quick kiss.

"I'll see you a little later."

"I should be back in time for lunch." Chouji told her.

Irmana smiled at him. "Good, I'll be waiting for when you get back."

She had not brought up their strange meeting or the way she had run away from him. But since she seemed back to normal and hadn't brought it up he hadn't either. "I'll see you then honey." He leaned down and they shared a nice long kiss before he left.

"Ino!"

She stopped at the door and looked back. "Yeah mom?"

"Your boyfriend is on the phone he wants to talk to you."

"Tell him I'll talk to him later when I get back."

Her mother looked at her. "Don't you want to talk to him just for a minute?"

"Not really. I'll see you later mom." She left her home.

Asuma stood on the roof of a building. He was looking across the way into her apartment. He reached into his vest and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. As he pulled one out he stopped himself. Chuckling he put it back and returned the pack to its usual place. She was sitting down reading. He loved her. He loved her so much. But... there were issues. With a last smile he leapt away.

Kurenai looked up from her book and out the window. She'd had a sense she was being watched, but there was no one there.

"Hey Chouji." Ino said just a little nervously.

He smiled at her. "Hey Ino." He said in his usual friendly tone.

Shikamaru looked at his watch as Asuma landed. "Right on time sensei."

Asuma grinned. "Just be glad I'm not Kakashi."

Shikamaru shrugged. "I wouldn't mind waiting just more time to watch clouds. So is there anyone else joining us?"

Asuma shook his head. "Kotetsu and Izumo got other missions at the last minute, so it'll just be us."

Shikamaru nodded. "I don't mind. I like having squad ten together in a mission. We don't get to do it very often anymore."

"That's to be expected." Asuma gave him a sly look. "You know Shikamaru you've been a Jonin for awhile now. Isn't it about time you get a squad of your own?"

"Too troublesome."

"Maybe, but I think you'd make a damn fine sensei. You think about it."

Shikamaru looked pleased. "Thank you sensei."

Asuma noticed that Chouji and Ino were talking a bit. "All right let's go." Team ten left on its mission.

Naruto smiled. "Shadow clones huh?"

Kakashi nodded. "That's right; by using shadow clones you can learn years worth of training in weeks. With that you can maybe complete what sensei wanted to do. You create your very own jutsu."

"All right! So how do I start?"

Kakashi held out a single leaf. "I want you to use your wind chakra to cut this leaf in half."

"Well that was fun." Hidan said. "I sort of enjoyed the slaughter. But did we really have to destroy a temple?"

Kakuza shifted the corpse he was carrying to a different shoulder. "What do you care? It's not like those monks followed Jashin."

"No but they were still men of faith. I can appreciate how rare that is when almost everyone is totally faithless." He looked directly at his partner.

Kakuza laughed. "Hey I have faith! It's just that I happen to worship money."

"Whatever you godless heathen. You know you're always bitching about how much time we spend while I perform my prayers. Well we're wasting time now because of this."

"Hey no way are we passing up a bounty like this! This guy was a member of the shinobi guardsmen; he's a big time paycheck. Any way we're almost to the bounty station."

"Hey Asuma."

"Yes Shikamaru?" They were flying through the trees.

"Have you ever been married?"

"What?" Asuma very nearly missed a tree limb.

Shikamaru looked at him. "Well have you? I don't really know that much about your past sensei and I was curious."

"No Shikamaru, I've never been married."

"Ever thought about it?"

Asuma eyed his favorite former student. "Now where is this coming from?"

"Well you're a lot older than me or Naruto and we're both taking the plunge. Naruto even made the decision to ask Hinata to marry him in about a day. So I was just wondering if you've ever thought about it."

"I've thought about it." He said simply.

"And?"

"And my life is complicated Shikamaru. Marriage is a huge step, a huge commitment, and for a ninja whose life is always in danger it's not easy."

"You know Asuma I've never really thought that Naruto was much of a thinker, and that's putting it nicely. But in one regard he's pretty sharp. He knows who he loves and who he wants to be with; and he doesn't want to waste time not being with her. He knows better than to be worrying about things that aren't that important."

Asuma had an amused look on his face. "Are you trying to give your teacher a hint?"

"No, just making an observation." He smiled at the older man. "You know Asuma-sensei I can pretty much read you like a book. I know just about everything about you."

"Really? Then tell me Shikamaru, why have I stopped smoking?"

Shikamaru frowned. "All right, everything except that."

Asuma laughed. "Come on we'll be there soon."

"Hey Chouji."

"Yeah Ino?"

"I've decided to break up with my boyfriend."

Chouji did not look particularly surprised. He was actually wondering if anyone had 15 days in the pool. "That's too bad. So who's the new guy?" That was her pattern. She always had someone else in mind when she ended a relationship.

"I've decided to stop dating for awhile."

"Really?" Ino blushed to see how shocked he appeared. "Why Ino?"

"I guess I finally realized that I'm still in love with someone, and he's the only one I want to be with."

Chouji frowned. "So you're going after Sasuke again. You know he won't appreciate a great girl like you."

Ino blushed a bit more. "No, not Sasuke, there's someone else. A very special boy, well he's a man, who I think I've been in love with for a very long time now."

"Really? Who is this guy? Whoever he is I hope he's someone who will love you the way you deserve. And I hope he appreciates how special and wonderful you are."

Her blush darkened. "Thank you Chouji."

He smiled. "I hope he loves you as much as I love Irmana."

"Ye... yes, I hope for that too."

"So who is this guy? Tell me."

She smiled weakly. "I'll tell you later."

"Oh come on Ino! Tell me who this guy is, I promise not to tell anyone else."

She shook her head. "I will tell you Chouji I promise, but not now."

Hidan stood up. "Well finally! So can we actually go now?"

Kakuza exited the building no longer with a dead monk but with a briefcase full of dead Daimyos. "Sure lets..." Four ninjas landed a good distance from them.

"Those cloaks!" Asuma said. "They're Akatsuki!"

Kakuza spied their leader and the cloth he wore at his belt. "He's another member of the twelve shinobi guardsmen. Looks like this is our lucky day!"

Hidan sighed. "Fine." Taking out his three bladed scythe he threw it at the guardsman.

"Look out sensei!" Chouji leapt forward and shoved Asuma out of the way. The scythe missed him but slightly cut open Chouji's forearm.

Hidan pulled the scythe back to his hand. Hidan laughed as he licked the small amount of blood from the blade. "Fine, I'll start with you since you volunteered."

" **Shadow Possession Technique.**" Two shadows quickly extended from Shikamaru. One caught Hiden while Kakuza spotted the other and leapt back.

"Huh, interesting I can't move." Hidan said.

"You're caught in my shadow possession technique." Shikamaru said. "You won't be able to escape. Surrender or I'll kill you."

Hidan frowned. "Kill me? Whenever someone makes a threat like that it just pisses me off."

"Let's not fool around." Kakuza said. "We still have work to do." He opened his mouth and what seemed like a stream of black wires shot out directly at Shikamaru. He immediately broke the connection and leapt back.

Hidan pout a bit more distance between them and then quickly drew a circle with a triangle inside. "You have been cursed by god. Now I'll begin the ceremony." Hidan transformed into his, 'reaper' form. His face a frightening black and pale white.

Asuma took out his trench knives. "I'll lead the way the rest of you back me up."

Chouji nodded and performed a jutsu. " **Body Expansion Technique.**" He quickly became twenty feet tall.

Asuma leapt forward. Kakuza fired off more black wires at him. With his chakra surrounding his trench blades he sliced through them easily. He landed near Hidan and jabbed him through the shoulder.

Hidan grunted. "That hurts."

"Ow!" Chouji shouted out in pain and grabbed his shoulder.

"Chouji what's wrong?" Ino shouted.

"I don't know it feels like some thing's stabbing my shoulder."

Hidan swung his scythe and forced Asuma to step back. Kakuza came at him. Black wires leapt from his back, several of them. Asuma swiftly cut a few but had to jump back towards his team as a couple managed to cut him slightly.

Kakuza glared at his partner. "We don't have time for this! Stop fooling around!"

Hidan took out a small sharpened rod. "Oh let me have just a little bit of fun." He stabbed his own thigh clean through.

Chouji screamed. His jutsu dispelled and a normal sized Chouji collapsed to the ground clutching his leg. "It hurts!"

"Chouji!" Ino was immediately at his side performing a medical jutsu. "I don't understand your shoulder and leg have both been damaged."

Hidan laughed. "Hurts doesn't it?" He pulled out the rod and held it out before his chest. "Don't worry since my partner is so impatient I won't play with you any longer."

Shikamaru put it all together. "No! I won't let you!" He worked his jutsu again and was able to take possession of Hidan before he could drive the point home. "Everyone! I don't know how but that guy

is working some kind of jutsu where any harm he takes is inflicted on Chouji! If he stabs himself in the chest Chouji will die!"

Kakuza laughed. "Yes that's true." He leapt at Shikamaru and sent a number of wires at him. "Now please stop interfering so we can kill your friend."

Shikamaru saw the wires coming but stood his ground, he would rather die than break the jutsu now. Asuma leapt in front of him. Using his chakra he expanded the length of his blades and cut the wires before they could reach Shikamaru.

"Ino!" Shikamaru shouted. "I can only hold him for so long! Take him over!"

"Right!" She quickly ran through some hand signs. **"Mind Body Switch Technique."** Ino's form slumped to the ground.

Hidan smiled. "It's o.k. now Shika I've got control!"

"Good." Shikamaru ended his jutsu.

Hidan turned to Kakuza. "You can't hurt me without hurting your friend."

"So?" Without warning Kakuza sent a wire straight through Hidan's chest. Hidan screamed and collapsed. Ino's body coughed up blood.

Chouji screamed and clutched his chest.

"No!" Shikamaru screamed. He leapt forward.

"You bastard!" Asuma ran forward as well.

From his back two clay masks came forward. Opening their mouths one spat fire at Asuma and the other a concentrated wind at Shikamaru. Both were forced to dodge.

"Damn it you ruined my fun!" Hidan climbed to his feet, he once again had a human appearance. "I didn't even get to feel the death blow!"

"Don't complain we got three more for you..." Kakuza suddenly paused. "What right now?"

"Can't this wait just a few minutes?" Hidan complained.

Within their heads they heard their leader speak. *The three tails is ready to be harvested. That takes priority over everything else. Get back here **now**.*

"Well it looks like you f#kers are lucky. We have to go." He looked to where Ino was on her hands and knees crawling to where Chouji was lying. "Don't worry about your friend he's already dead."

"Damn you!" Asuma shouted furiously.

Kakuza laughed. "Save it for next time." The two of them disappeared.

Ino knew she was seriously hurt, but it was not fatal. She crawled to Chouji's side. "Chouji, it'll be o.k. I'll heal you." She performed the diagnostic jutsu to see how bad it was.

Chouji had a small stream of blood coming from the corner of his lips. "Ino, it's all right. I had a good run."

"Don't talk like that! You're going to be all right!"

He smiled a little for her. "No I'm not, I can tell."

Asuma and Shikamaru were kneeling at his side. "Chouji." Asuma spoke desperately.

"Chouji, are you all right?" He looked desperately at Ino. "Ino how is he?"

Ino looked up at him and tears were streaming down her face. "He," she choked trying to get the words out. "He's been str... struck at three vital points. I can't do anything." She looked down at the sweet boy she loved. "Oh Chouji!"

"It's all right, it's all right." He gasped for air. "I always knew it might end like this. I'm not afraid, at least I get to say good bye to each of you." He looked at Asuma. "Asuma-sensei, you've been like second dad to me. Thank you for training me and believing in me and giving me good advice." He grinned a bit. "But most of all thank you for all that delicious free barbecue."

Asuma grinned sadly and put a hand on each shoulder. "You're very welcome Chouji. You are the sweetest kindest boy I've ever known." Ino and Shikamaru each took hold of one of his hands.

"Shika," he was having trouble breathing. "You've been my very best friend, you believed in me when no one else did. I want you to know your friendship meant everything to me. My best friend."

"Chouji," Shikamaru found the words stuck in his throat. "You're the best friend a guy could ever have. You really are the best Chouji."

Chouji slowly turned his head to face a weeping Ino. "Please don't cry Ino. I want to see you smile one more time."

Wiping her tears with the back of her hand she tried. It was a pale imitation of her usual smile but it was the best she could do.

It was getting dark, his strength was fading. He squeezed her hand a bit. He needed her to know. "I love you Ino. I have always been in love with you. I could never stop." He gave her a sad look now and she had to fight not to burst into tears again. "I know... you never felt the same. I don't... blame you... I understand. I... truly loved Irmana, she made me happy. Please tell her that. But... even though I loved her. A little bit... of my heart... was always yours. I could... never... stop loving... you." The breaths were coming harder.

"Oh Chouji forgive me! Forgive me for always being such a stupid shallow girl! Forgive me for always caring so much about what others thought! I never admitted the truth to myself until it was too late." She shuddered. "I'm always too late. It was you Chouji! The boy I finally realized I was in love with, it was you! I love you Chouji! I love you! I love you!"

He smiled. "Really?"

"Yes really!"

"Ino... can I... have a kiss?"

In answer she bent down and gently touched her lips. There was the coppery taste of blood but she pressed her lips to his and prayed that he could feel her love for him through that kiss.

As their lips parted he whispered just loud enough for her to hear.

"Ino... I... love..." and his final breath left him.

Akimichi Chouji was dead.

"CHOUJI!!" Ino howled and threw her self on his chest. She wept unashamedly. Asuma mourned silently and gently touched her shoulder to try and comfort her. It was beginning to rain.

Shikamaru turned away unable to look at the body of his dearest and oldest friend. He wiped his eyes as the rain came down. "Damn rain gets in my eyes." He choked out.

Terrible news

The ninja slammed a fist into his jaw. The next thing he knew he was laying on the floor. He could taste blood and a couple of teeth felt loose. The ninja was standing over him glaring. "What did you say?" The ninja demanded.

He wiped some blood from his lips. "All I said was that it was just business. This is a bounty station you know."

A hand gripped him around the neck and he was hauled to his feet. "That guy you have lying there." The ninja nodded to the corpse still on the table. "His name was Chiruki and he was a good friend of mine."

"I know who he was, I paid out the bounty on him after all." He grunted in pain as he was punched in the gut while still being held in place.

"Yes and I'm sure if I'd been the one killed you'd have been just as happy to pay out the bounty on me."

The man looked desperately at the other ninja in the room. He was younger and was simply watching disinterestedly. "Are you just going to stand there?"

The ninja looked at him with mild disgust. "Helping Asuma sensei take out his frustration on you would be too troublesome. If being the crap out of you helps Asuma deal with his pain I'm all for it."

"Just be glad you're wanted for interrogation." He hit him once more, this time knocking him out.

"You feel any better?" Shikamaru asked.

"Not really." Asuma pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He took one out and put it in his mouth. He was just about to light it when he stopped. He took it from his lips and snapped it in half. He then crushed the pack in a fist and threw it away. "I am never smoking again."

"Smoking is an almost impossible habit to break." Shikamaru pointed out.

"Well I have a really good motivation. Do you want to know why I've decided to give up smoking?"

Shikamaru thought about it and finally nodded. "Yeah I do, though it's not as big a priority as it used to be."

Asuma told him the reason.

"Asuma!" Shikamaru looked at him stunned. "Now I get it!"

Asuma nodded. "You have to admit it's a good reason to stop."

Shikamaru nodded. "It's the best possible reason. So what are you going to do when we get back?"

As Asuma was about to answer that Ino shambled into the hidden room. They both knew she had to still be in a state of shock. She didn't mention anything about the odor or that she'd had to walk through a men's room. "Asuma-sensei, the ANBU have arrived they want to talk to you about what happened."

Asuma nodded. The sooner he got this out of the way the sooner he could get everyone home.

The ANBU would return the body and the prisoner. Asuma was told to bring his team back and report to the Hokage. As he brought his team back he was stunned to note it would only be a couple of hours after they had left. Such a short time to have everything change. As

they arrived at the gates they saw a familiar red haired girl approach them.

Shikamaru sighed. "This is going to be a lot worse than troublesome." He looked at Asuma. "She's my cousin I'll talk to her while the two of you go to the tower."

"No," Ino interrupted. "Chouji asked me to tell her how he felt about her. I'll do it."

Shikamaru looked at her. She seemed to have pulled herself back together. "Are you sure Ino?"

She nodded. "I know she really loved him and he really loved her. I owe it to Chouji to be the one to tell her."

Shikamaru looked at Asuma who nodded. "All right Ino, we'll see you later." The two of them headed off.

Irmana approached Ino. "Hey Ino! Where's Chouji? He wanted to have lunch with me."

Ino looked at the girl she had secretly resented for so long. But now all she felt for the girl was a deep sympathy. "Irmana there's something I need to tell you." Ino could see fear began to surface on her face.

The Hokage looked out the window. One more of her brave soldiers was gone. One more sacrifice made to protect and serve Konoha. This was the absolute worst part of being Hokage.

"Is that all?" She asked quietly.

"Yes Hokage-sama." Asuma replied.

Tsunade slowly nodded. "I'll need to call in Choza and tell him what happened."

"Hokage-sama," Asuma spoke. "I was Chouji's sensei and know the family well. Please allow me to do this."

"Are you sure?"

"Hai."

Tsunade let out a sigh. "Very well."

Asuma looked at Shikamaru. "You should go and tell your folks, they'll want to know. I can handle this alone."

Shikamaru nodded. Telling them would be hard. "All right, I'll see you later."

"No! Not Chouji!" Irmana cried out.

"I'm sorry." Ino put her arms around the girl.

Irmana cried for a bit before she could speak again. "Did... did he..."

Ino understood. "You were the very last thing on his mind." Ino spoke kindly. "The last thing he did was ask me to tell you how much he loved you and how happy you made him."

She looked up with her tear streaked face. "Did... did he really say that?"

Ino nodded. "He did. He loved you, and only you, to the very end."

"Oh Chouji!" She sobbed. "I love you I love you!"

Ino hugged the girl and comforted her as best she could.

"Hey Shika!" Temari called cheerfully. "Lunch will be ready in about fifteen minutes."

"How was the mission son?" Shikaku asked.

It was Yoshino who first picked up on her son's mood. "Son what happened?" The question got the attention of the other two.

Shikamaru decided there was nothing to be gained by trying to disguise the wretched truth. "We ran into the Akatsuki and there was a big fight." He sighed. "Chouji didn't survive." There were gasps all around.

"Chouji? Chouji's... gone?" Shikaku asked stunned.

"Yeah," Shikamaru said numbly. "He's gone."

It was one of the few times when his mother seemed to have nothing to say.

"Shikamaru I'm so sorry." She came to him and wrapped him in a comforting embrace.

"Thanks." He put his arms around her and found comfort.

"How did it happen?" Shikaku asked.

Though it was hard Shikamaru related the details of the fight.

Shikaku got up. "Are you all right son?" With his son's nod he put on his jacket. "I have to go see Choza.

Shikamaru said. "Yeah, I'll go to in a little bit."

Yoshino and Temari shared a glance and an understanding. "I'm going as well. His poor mother is going to be devastated by this." Yoshino left with her husband.

"I should go to." Shikamaru muttered. "I just need a little rest first."

With her arms still wrapped around him she looked into his eyes with kindness and love. "It's all right." She whispered to him.

"Huh?"

"If you need to cry you can. You know it's all right." This was not Temari's usual demeanor. This was the soft and gentle side of her that she only ever showed to the ones she loved.

"I don't..." he stopped as he felt hot tears running down his face. Somehow when he looked into her eyes he was just able to let go.

She squeezed him tight. "It's all right Shikamaru. It's all right." She whispered to him.

"Chouji's gone." He choked out.

Temari nodded. She had liked Chouji and would miss him. But he had been Shikamaru's closest and dearest friend. She would grieve for Chouji, but right now Shikamaru needed her.

Hearing a loud knock on her door Kurenai opened it. There was a pale and weary looking Asuma. "Asuma! I heard what happened." She pulled him into her apartment and shut the door.

"Bad news travels fast I see."

She hugged him and pressed her head against his chest. "I am so sorry! Are you and the others all right?"

He nodded grimly. "None of them were hurt but they're both taking it hard."

Kurenai looked up at him. "So are you."

"Yeah, it's the first time I've lost someone since my father." He let out a deep sigh. "Not to mention this was Chouji. The kid had the biggest heart I ever saw and he loved his friends. He didn't deserve what happened to him."

"I know," she said gently. She reached up and touched his face. "I'm very sorry about Chouji, but I'm glad you're all right."

He wrapped his arms around her and leaned down to give her an eager kiss. "Kurenai there's something really important that I need to ask you."

"What is it?"

He dropped to one knee and pulled out a small case. He opened it to reveal a ring. "Yuhi Kurenai, will you marry me?"

Ino was lying on her bed staring at a photo. It was of her and Chouji at his twelfth birthday party. That was before he met Irmana and back when she was deluded enough to still think Sasuke was the love of her life. Back then she would always give him one dance at his birthday. She could remember how happy that always made him and how he always pleaded for more dances with her. She could also remember how she thought she was a really good person for giving him that one dance. Chouji's heart had been hers; but she hadn't wanted it.

"Oh Chouji I'm sorry." She began to cry again as she curled up around the picture.

They were lying on the living room couch. They were wrapped up in each other's arms. For once he wasn't trying to make out with her and cop a feel. This one time he was content just to lie there with her. As they held one another she hummed a lullaby to him. Some how it seemed the right thing to do.

"Thank you Temari." He spoke with his eyes peacefully closed.

"You're welcome Shikamaru."

He actually managed a slight grin. "I guess I'm pretty troublesome, huh?"

She chuckled. "You know you really are, but lucky for you I love you so it's o.k."

"I love you too."

She nuzzled her face against his. "I know."

Kurenai stared at him in shock. "Excuse me?"

"Kurenai," he said with complete certainty. "Will you marry me?"

"What happened to you not being sure you could make that sort of commitment? What happened to wanting to keep our relationship private?"

"What happened? I got a reminder of just how fragile our lives really are and just how precious every moment must be. Kurenai I am completely in love with you and I want the whole world to know. I want you and I want our baby. I am ready to make a commitment to you and to our child for as long as I live. I love you."

She stared down at him for a moment. "I love you too Asuma and I want to be with you for the rest of my life. Yes, I will marry you."

Passing judgment

Ino was waiting patiently in the living room when her parents finally returned. "Hey mom, daddy, how are Choza and Mrs. Akimichi?"

Both Inoichi and his wife were relieved to see she was much calmer now. "They're both taking it very hard as you'd expect." Inoichi replied. "Fortunately they have a lot of family and friends to help."

Ino cast her eyes to the floor. "I'm sorry I didn't go, I just needed some time by myself." She felt her father's strong but gentle touch on her shoulder.

"It's all right princess, everyone understands. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." She nodded dumbly. "I think I've finally done enough crying." She looked at her mom. "Mom could I talk to daddy alone for a bit?"

"Of course honey." She gave her daughter a quick hug and left the two of them alone.

"What is it princess?"

He saw his daughter straighten her stance and harden her face. She suddenly seemed a young woman rather than a little girl. "Daddy, do you remember that jutsu you wanted to teach me a few months ago? The one I said I would *never* use?"

Inoichi nodded. "Of course princess, what about it?"

"Please teach it to me daddy."

He looked at her in surprise. "Are you sure? The last time you told me you could never bring yourself to use it on someone." Inoichi saw

a look flash into his daughter's eyes, a look he'd seen many times before and one he'd hoped she would never get.

She nodded and spoke in a cold voice she had never used before. "I've met two men I want to use it on."

86

Chouji's funeral s held in the late morning. Shikaku, Yoshino, and Temari exited the house, all in their black mourning clothes.

"Where is Shikamaru?" Temari asked. "I thought we were all going together."

Shikaku shrugged. "I suppose he may have gone on ahead."

"Maybe," Yoshino sounded dubious. She looked over to her future daughter in law. "Temari."

"Yes?" Yoshino approached her and spoke in a low whisper. "You really think so?"

Yoshino simply shrugged. "If I'm wrong just meet us at the service." Yoshino left to join her husband. Temari headed off in another direction.

"You know I've always wanted to ask you something."

Shikamaru turned his eyes from the heavens to see Temari climbing the hill towards him. As he tossed a potato chip into his mouth he thought that he wasn't really surprised. "What's that?"

"Why this hill? Why of all the hills on your family's property you only ever use this one to look at clouds."

He shrugged. "It's the first one I ever climbed to look at clouds from."

She smiled. "And finding another hill would just be too troublesome huh?" Without saying anything else she sat down next to him and then laid out on the grass.

They just lay there quietly together for a few minutes. Finally Shikamaru broke the silence. "I suppose you're here to drag me to the ceremony." He ate another chip.

She looked at him as though he were an idiot. "Does it look like I'm trying to drag you anywhere?"

He grinned and offered her his bag of chips. "Want some?"

"Sure." She reached in and pulled out a handful.

He looked from her back up at a cloudy sky. "It's a nice day."

"Yeah it is."

A few more minutes passed and they just looked at clouds and ate chips.

He let out a sigh. "Do you think I should go to the funeral?"

"Nope," she said. "I think you should do whatever helps you get through this loss. Everyone knows how close the two of you were. They'll all understand." She paused for a bit. "If you'd rather be alone right now I'll understand."

"Don't go Temari." He reached out and took a hold of her hand. "Please don't ever leave me."

She looked at him and grinned. "I'll never leave you Shikamaru."

Hearing that he relaxed and gave her a little grin of his own. They spent the rest of that morning peacefully looking at clouds and munching on chips.

A great many people turned out to honor and remember Chouji. With the exception of Chouji the rest of the Konoha 12 were there. Naruto and Hinata arrived together and remained side by side throughout. Sakura and Sasuke arrived separately and despite some efforts by Sakura did not speak. Lee arrived with his sensei and stood by his teammates. Though he spotted Sakura he deliberately avoided her, much to his sensei's surprise. Asuma and Kurenai arrived together and stood together. That surprised no one. The sight of them holding hands in public though raised many eyebrows. (Out of respect for the Akimichi family they had decided to wait before announcing their engagement. Thus Kurenai was not wearing her ring.) Iruka was also there to honor one of his former students. Kakashi was there and had arrived only fifteen minutes late. Irmana had come with her mother. Ino gave the girl a hug and a few consoling words before returning to her family's side. Inoichi and Shikaku spoke to Choza, offering him all their support and friendship. In her mourning clothes a solemn Tsunade performed the ceremony. Each person came forward to lay down a single white flower before a smiling picture of Chouji. Following that the coffin was lowered into the earth. With a few final words the funeral was completed and people began to drift away.

Ino was the last one to go. She stayed there and just stared at the old photo and the flowers. She didn't really notice the time, more than an hour had passed when she was finally ready. "Goodbye Chouji." Alone she headed back home.

85

"He's immortal?" Shikamaru frowned. "Are you sure?"

"A hundred percent?" Ino shook her head. "I didn't possess him long enough to do a deep scan. In the time I had though I got hit by two thoughts pretty clearly. One, he can't die no matter how bad he's hurt. And two, he's some kind of religious zealot with some weird religion."

Shikamaru slowly nodded, both those things might be useful. "Did you pick up anything about his partner?"

"Not a thing."

Asuma spoke. "Well we have some idea of his powers. He has razor sharp wire he can extend in any direction, as well as the ability to unleash fire or wind from those masks."

Shikamaru nodded. "Yes, but what else can he do? Is he immortal too? What are his weak points?"

Asuma shrugged. "No real way to know we'll just have to be ready for anything."

"Sounds like good advice to me." Temari strolled into Asuma's kitchen. All three of them stared at her as she plopped down in the chair next to Shikamaru.

"Temari!" Asuma demanded. "How did you get in here without me knowing?"

She laughed. "I've been training with Shikaku for three years now, I've picked up a few things. Now let me save you a lot of time and trouble. When you go after these bastards who killed Chouji I'm coming with you."

Asuma was about to argue when Shikamaru spoke. "Fine."

Asuma stared at his prize student. "Shikamaru! You actually want her with us for an S-rank mission?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "Not really, but I can see she's serious about coming with us. If we try and leave her out she'll just follow us. It'll be less troublesome to just include her. Besides we may need her to succeed."

Grinning she reached out and patted the top of Shikamaru's head. "Ah, it took awhile but I finally got you well trained."

Shikamaru muttered. "Troublesome woman," and they got back to making plans.

"WHAT?! No! No way! Baachan how can you even think about doing this?!" Naruto demanded.

Tsunade got a couple shades of red as she prepared to shout back. "Damn it brat this is not up for debate! Anko interrogated the bounty contractor that Asuma captured. He confirms that those two Akatsuki were in the area for other business. Their going after a bounty was just a side job for them. Given what Akatsuki is after their can only be *one* reason they were so close to Konoha. It is almost 100 percent certain that they have come here for you Naruto."

"Good! If they want me then let me go take them on! I'll kick their sorry asses! I've fought them before you know and I've even killed one of them."

"I know that Naruto! But these two Akatsuki will be looking for you. There is absolutely *no* way I will allow you to be on one of the teams that searches for them."

"But why not?" Naruto demanded.

"Because as their target you'd be in more danger than anyone else."

"But..."

"No buts! These men are all S-rank criminals and extremely dangerous. They defeated Gaara in his Shukaku form and blew up ANBU headquarters. As their target you'd be in far too much danger if you went out looking for them."

"So instead you're putting me under house arrest?! How is that fair? I can't even train!"

"It's not an arrest and it's not any sort of punishment. It'll just be safer for you to stay in your apartment where the ANBU and Kakashi can keep an eye on you. Think of it as a little vacation."

He pouted. "I don't want a vacation!"

Tsunade sighed. "Hinata can stay and keep you company."

"I don't..." He suddenly stopped. Slowly he began to smile. "Well o.k. baachan, if you think it's best."

84

Hidan and Kakuzu were headed towards the leaf village in the early morning dawn. "No more getting side tracked with stupid bounties." Hidan scolded.

"Fine, fine, let's just collect the nine tails and get this over with."

Unnoticed one of the many scouts sent out by Tsunade spotted them. He was under strict orders not to try and engage them but to merely contact Konoha. Scrawling out a short note he attached it to a pigeon's leg and released the bird.

"How far away are they?" Shikamaru asked. He and his team were at the gate talking with the Hokage.

"They were ten miles west of here," Tsunade replied displaying the small message. "They'll be closer now."

"We'll find them." Ino said flatly.

Tsunade frowned. "Since you've fought them before I agreed to let you lead our response, but I want you to be very careful. If you get into trouble call for reinforcement and pull back."

"I understand Hokage-sama." Asuma replied.

She turned to Temari. "I don't like you going on this mission Temari."

Temari sent Tsunade a determined scowl. "I'm going," she said flatly. "I won't let Shikamaru face this without me."

Tsunade slowly nodded, but remained unhappy.

Asuma looked at his unit. "All right team let's move out."

Hidan and Kakuzu came to a halt.

"Well look who it f#&king is!" Hidan said.

Kakuzu grinned. "Well now, I didn't think I'd get another chance at your bounty."

Hidan sent him a sharp look. "No more f#&king bounties I told you!"

"Hey! No way am I walking away when he's standing right in front of me!" Kakuzu snapped back.

"You guys really are a couple of idiots aren't you?"

Both of them stopped and glared at the blonde who had insulted them. "Who the f#&k are you?"

"Sabaku no Temari, soon to be Nara, at your service." She bit down on her thumb and put the blood on her open fan. "You're going to regret what you did here last time." She held her fan back and then swung it forward. " **Slash Slash Dance.**" Her one eye weasel summon appeared and went forward with his scythe. Asuma, Ino, and Shikamaru held on as just the backlash of her attack took the air from their lungs.

The two Akatsuki were tossed about like a couple of leaves in the windstorm as her powerful jutsu leveled a couple miles of forest.

"All right! They're separated, now like we planned." Asuma called out. He and Shikamaru went one way while Temari and Ino went another.

"F#&k!" Hidan yelled as he untangled himself from beneath a pile of branches. He would have to find where his damn partner was and deal with those annoying little bastards.

" **Shadow Possession Technique.**" Hidan suddenly found himself frozen in the middle of freeing himself.

Hidan glared at the two of them. "You f#&kers! Wait until I get my hands on you!"

"I analyzed our previous encounter. Without your enemies blood you're not really much of anything are you? Now without your partner and caught in my jutsu you're completely helpless."

"F#&k you!"

Asuma approached him with trench knives. "Ino says you're immortal. Let's find out."

The razor wire came at each of them even as they approached from different directions.

" **Wall Of Wind Technique.**" Temari waved her fan and a powerful gust of wind sent Kakuzu sprawling among the fallen trees. Ino dashed forward to try and get in range. "Ino don't!"

Up on his knees he saw Ino approach and sent a couple streams of wire at her. Ino only just managed to dodge in time. "I don't know what you stupid girls think you can do against me, but you are seriously outmatched."

"Oh really?" Temari asked and sent another wall of wind into him. "You could have fooled me."

He moved one of his masks to the front of his body and sent a blast of wind Temari's way. She countered with a wind attack of her own and the two cancelled each other out. He turned towards Ino who was still trying to sneak towards him. "And what do you think you're doing little girl?" He sent some wire her way and she leapt back in frustration. She had to be much closer.

"I'm going to make you pay for what you did to Chouji!" Ino cried even as she moved back.

Kakuzu laughed. "I'm guessing that's the name of that fat slob me and my partner killed last time."

"Shut up!" Ino screamed and tossed a handful of kunai at him. "He wasn't fat he was big boned!"

The mask on his chest opened its mouth and a blast of wind deflected the kunai and knocked Ino back down. "Seriously! Do the two of you really think you're a match for me?"

Temari smiled as she hurried to Ino's side. "No, but we don't have to be."

" **Shadow Possession Technique.**" Kakuzu ground his unique body frozen in place.

"Our job wasn't to defeat you." Temari said smugly. "Just keep you occupied while Asuma and Shika dealt with your partner. Now we'll deal with you as a full team."

Ino got back to her feet and began to approach him. "You stabbed me through the chest while I was in possession of your partner. So as far as I'm concerned you were the one who delivered the death blow to Chouji." She stood directly in front of him. "Now you're going

to pay for that." She worked a series of complex hand signs. "**Eternal Madness Technique.**"

For Kakuzu everything went dark.

He suddenly woke up on a cold and dirty street. He looked up to see it was snowing. Looking down at himself he saw he was a little boy again wearing old torn rags. He saw the cold looks in people's eyes and the buildings. He was back in Waterfall; he was a homeless brat living on the streets again.

"So, this is your idea of hell? It's different I admit. I was expecting more of the whole fire and brimstone thing, but whatever works for you."

He turned around and there was the Leaf kunoichi standing there smiling at him coldly. "You bitch! What the hell is this?"

She chuckled. "Hell is what this is." She answered simply.

He glared at her. "What is this some type of genjutsu?"

She shook her head. "No, no genjutsu, no illusion, this place will seem absolutely real to you. My clan specializes in jutsus that affect the mind. What I just used on you is my clan's ultimate attack. I went into your mind and let you create your very own personal hell and allowed you to exist here. Your real body is comatose, but for you this will be reality for as long as you live. A poor little street urchin living alone and hungry with no one to care for him. For the rest of your life this will be your reality."

He glared at her. He brought his hands together. "Kai!" She laughed at him. "I'll find a way to get out of this."

"No you won't." She spoke with a cruel air of passing judgment. "The only ones who could undo this would be members of my own clan,

and none of us will. This is your punishment for killing the boy I love. Now enjoy rotting in your own personal hell."

With that she was gone and he was on his own.

Ino collapsed and was caught by Asuma. The jutsu had used up most of her chakra, but was worth it.

"Ino are you all right?" Asuma asked.

Ino looked at the figure of Kakuzu. He was just standing there staring dumbly out into space.

"Remind me to never get you mad at me." Shikamaru said.

A cloth sack on his belt was making a bunch of noise. Opening Shikamaru looked down at the severed head of Hidan.

"You f#&ker! What are you going to go with me now?"

Shika grinned. "Bring you back to Konoha for interrogation to learn about the Akatsuki. After that we'll stick you in a filing cabinet somewhere."

Hidan continued to curse but he closed the sack.

Asuma nodded. "Let's go home."

What am I to you?

76

Both of them were bent over and panting. Sweat covered them and they were both exhausted. Despite being equally weary they wore completely different expressions. One boy looked unhappy and worried, while the other wore a satisfied little grin.

Lee slowly stood and nodded to the other. "Yosh, it is done Sasuke. You have now mastered the technique. There is nothing further that I can teach you."

"Thanks Lee, I really appreciate it."

Lee frowned at him. "I did not do it for you Sasuke."

He nodded. "I know, but I still appreciate it."

"Now that we are done Sasuke I will go, but before I do I will warn you a final time. There is a reason I was specifically forbidden to teach this technique by both the Hokage and my sensei." By the look on his face it was obvious he was more worried about his sensei.

"Lee, I give you my word I will only activate the gates for one reason."

"For vengeance," Lee shook his head. "That is an unyouthful reason. This power should only be used to protect a loved one or guard one's ninja way."

"Vengeance *is* my way of the ninja."

Lee sighed. "I see that nothing I can say will make a difference. Very well, I will only remind you of this. The more gates you open and the more power you draw the more likely you are to die. Open the eighth

gate and you *will* die Sasuke. Open the seventh and your odds are one in two. Please keep this in mind, for her sake if not for yours."

"I will." Was all Sasuke would commit to.

"Good night Sasuke." With that Lee left Sasuke's home and went out into the abandoned Uchiha compound.

He was just leaving the compound when he ran into someone who'd been approaching it.

"Lee!" Sakura smiled at him. "What are you doing here? Do you know if Sasuke is home?"

To her surprise he stiffened in front of her. "I was here doing what you asked me to Sakura; helping Sasuke. And yes, he is home. Good night Sakura." With a slight nod he began to walk past her.

She was really taken aback by his total lack of enthusiasm and warmth towards her. She was also surprised and a little bothered by the lack of a, 'chan' at the end of her name. "Lee-kun, I haven't seen you in awhile. I'm free tomorrow, why don't we get dinner?" He would normally jump at the chance to take her out.

Lee halted and looked back over his shoulder at her. "No thank you Sakura. I will let you keep that day open in case Sasuke wishes to do something with you." With that he again walked away from her without another glance or word.

Sakura watched him go and was surprised at the hurt she felt. **He hates us now!** Inner Sakura moaned. *No he doesn't!* Sakura thought. **Yes he does!** Inner Sakura insisted. **And you know what? He should hate us!** Images of passionate kisses with Sasuke flashed through her mind. Feeling guilty she looked away from him. She quickly got moving again and reminded herself of why she was there.

He knew from, the rhythm of the knocks who it was. He was tempted to not answer but all the lights were on. Taking a deep breath he opened his front door. "Hello Sakura."

She frowned. "You know Sasuke you're the second boy in the last five minutes to not call me Sakura-chan."

He shrugged. "Sorry, so how are you doing Sakura-chan? There, that better?"

"No, not really, it doesn't count if you have to be reminded." She stood there for a moment. "Well?" Sasuke quirked an eyebrow. She sighed. "Are you going to invite me in?"

He stepped back and waved her in. "What can I do for you?" He shut the door behind her.

She stood there in his home and looked at him. She had come here absolutely hell bent to get some things off her chest. But now that she was actually here she wasn't sure just what to say. "We need to talk."

He gave her the exact same annoyed look he'd been giving her since their academy days. "We talked at training just this morning." He answered in his usual belittling tone.

That was it. That was the last straw and something inside her snapped. "That's not what I mean and you damn well know it!" She shouted at him. "You've barely said two words to me since I got Lee to help you! What the hell is going on? You practically throw me on the ground to make out with me and now you want nothing to do with me!"

He looked at her with the tiniest smirk on his lips. "It's not like I had to force you to kiss me Sakura."

She felt her face darken with shame. "I know that." She admitted. "But why have you been avoiding me like the plague?"

"I haven't been avoiding you Sakura. I just don't have the time to deal with you."

Her face darkened and took on a look that Naruto dreaded but that Sasuke had never seen before. "What do you mean *deal* with me?"

He sighed and shook his head. "I mean *this* Sakura You coming over here and wanting to talk about *feelings*." He sent her a harsh look. "Honestly Sakura don't you know by now what matters to me? I need to get stronger; that has never changed. All my time and effort has to go into that. I don't have time to waste on dates or romance."

She stared at him. "Then why did you kiss me?"

He looked right back at her calm and unconcerned. "Because you wouldn't have helped me if I hadn't."

She thought she could feel her heart begin to crack. "You used me." She whispered.

He shrugged. "If I did then it was no worse then how you used Lee. I don't think of it as using you Sakura. I just think of it as giving you what you wanted so you'd give me what I wanted."

She could really feel it. The pain of her heart breaking inside her. "Was that all it was to you? Just the price of getting my help? Didn't it mean anything to you at all?"

"I enjoyed it." He admitted. "But it was just kissing Sakura I never said it was anything more."

It was just kissing. It hadn't been just kissing to her. It had been the greatest joy she had ever felt in her life. His touch, his eager affection, the feel of lips on hers; it had been wondrous. All the years of wanting him, all the sacrifice, everything she had suffered had all suddenly seemed worthwhile. Finally he was hers and she was happy. To her it had definitely *not* been just kissing. To her it had been the single most important and meaningful moment of her life.

But to him it had been nothing. Just paying the whore for her services.

"Sasuke-kun what am I to you?"

He sighed. "You're a good friend and a good teammate." He looked at her seriously. "I like you Sakura, the same way I like Naruto."

Did you ever make out with Naruto you heartless bastard?!

Inner Sakura shouted. The real Sakura didn't try to argue anymore, either with him or with her inner self. She was done. All her hopes and dreams had been squashed. And they had been squashed with out even a raised voice. Sasuke had crushed her with shrugs and indifference. "I need to go." She said dully and made her way out. In a haze she shuffled away.

Ino was getting ready for bed. She had a mission tomorrow. Her heart still ached for her Chouji, but she had managed to heal a little. Vengeance had helped, at least a bit, but all the vengeance in the world couldn't fill what was empty inside her now. Given the hour she was surprised to hear a knock on her family's front door. When she answered it she was even more surprised to see who it was.

A weeping Sakura looked at her with shattered hopes. "Ino, can I talk to you for awhile?"

Ino immediately pulled her best friend inside. "Of course Sakura-chan, come on I'll make us some tea. What's wrong?"

"Everything," she confessed brokenly. "I'm such a fool."

He was lying on his bed trying to get to sleep. Memories kept him awake.

Tsunade took a deep breath. "I am afraid the chakra points in your eyes were degraded by the seal Jiraiya used to block your sharingan."

Sasuke stared at her not believing it. "What can you do to repair it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing, there is no known way to repair a degraded chakra point. I am afraid you can no longer put chakra in your eyes, and so can no longer activate the sharingan."

"You mean that idiot Jiraiya has destroyed my sharingan?!"

"Watch your mouth Sasuke! Whatever else he may be Jiraiya is your superior in all ways and you will speak of him with respect! He warned me that he couldn't know the long term effects of the seal, but I ordered him to use it any way. And if I had known then that this would be the result I still would have ordered your sharingan sealed!" He glared at her but she ignored it. "You may consider this part of the punishment for your betrayal of the village." Seeing how upset he was she tried to mollify him. "There is nothing stopping you from becoming a fine ninja with a good career. There's no reason to think you won't make Chunin soon."

He knew he'd hurt Sakura. That was why he'd avoided talking to her, to spare her for as long as he could. He'd known she would think his kissing her was more than it was. Even though he hadn't promised anything she'd read things into the act itself. *She probably thinks I'm a complete bastard now. And maybe I am. It still doesn't matter if I have enough power now.*

"Nice place you got here." Kisame said.

Orcinus smiled. "I'm glad you like it uncle. I'm planning on having it remodeled with heated indoor salt water pools."

Kisame grinned. "Now that's living."

"So do you two want to join my village?" The Otokage asked. "I'll make you two my lieutenants; you'll both have great wealth and power."

"And for your protection we will carry out your orders? That is what you are proposing is it not?" Itachi asked calmly.

Orcinus gave them a big toothy grin. "Well of course, if you become sound nins then you have to obey the Otokage."

"What do you say Itachi?" Kisame asked. "With my nephew's sword he can probably do what he plans."

Itachi considered that. "I will join you on one condition

Orcinus nodded. "I'm listening."

"You must allow me to capture my foolish little brother."

Orcinus laughed. "Fine, you can bring him with you when you capture the Kyuubi's container for me." He touched the pommel of his sword and felt the chakra within it. With the nine tails added to what was there now, he would be invincible.

Soon Orcinus thought. *Soon.*

Given freely

Author's Note: I know it has been awhile. As some of you probably know I have been rather absorbed with my other story which is a bit more popular. I do however still want to finish this trilogy. I plan to make an effort to get this story finished in the near future.

75

She made her way to the training ground not really sure what she was going to say to him. She would apologize of course for just how she had treated him. She really had been awful to him. She had willingly accepted his love and affection, all the while dreaming about someone else. She chuckled sourly as she realized that Sasuke had done to her exactly what she had done to Lee.

Yeah, except Sasuke's other person is Itachi who he wants to kill. Inner Sakura spoke up. Does that make us more or less pathetic?

Sakura didn't try to answer herself. After staying up all night crying and talking to Ino she had **finally** come to the realization that Sasuke would never love her. There was just no place in his heart for that sort of feeling. She and Sasuke would never be anything more than good friends. *Yeah, and it only took me eight freaking years and having my heart ripped to shreds to finally figure that out! And I'm supposed to be the smart one?* She shook her head at her own stupidity.

All the years of chasing after him, of bending herself to any shape she thought he might like and for what? The only affection he had ever shown her had been nothing but a way to trick her into doing what he wanted. And in the meantime she'd had the attention of two amazing boys, both of whom had truly cared for her and proven they would do anything for her.

She would never, ever, admit this to anyone, even Ino. But back when Sasuke had still been gone she had maybe, possibly, perhaps been starting to feel something more than friendship for Naruto. She had never acted on it. She had never accepted any of his unending requests for dates. Never given him a hint of encouragement. She wouldn't for a second consider choosing *that* Naruto over her beloved Sasuke-kun.

And then one day he had asked Hinata out and his infatuation with her had come to a complete and abrupt end. He still cared for her of course. They were still close. But she had stopped being the center of his world. Hinata was his everything now and the girl felt exactly the same about him. They were in love. She could still remember the day he'd returned with Jiraiya. How handsome he had looked, how strong. She could also remember the look on his face when he saw Hinata. It was pure bliss. It was what she had always wanted from Sasuke when he looked at her. She was happy for the two of them, she really was. But she couldn't help feeling just a little bit of jealousy whenever they kissed or held hands in front of her.

Then there had been Lee who had fallen for her on sight. (Much as she had done so many years before with Sasuke.) He had promised to protect her with his life, asking for nothing in return. In so many ways he was the exact opposite of Sasuke. He had no clan or family heritage. He was humble and always eager to pay her attention. He thought about her and cared what she thought. He put the needs of others always ahead of his own. He was always willing to share what was on his mind. He had grown up being told he would never be a ninja and having to fight for even the chance to become one. And if Lee lacked Sasuke's looks and simple grace he also lacked Sasuke's coldness. About the only thing they had in common was a ferocious work ethic and a commitment to getting stronger.

She had finally given Lee a chance mainly because she was sick of being alone and knew she could trust him. Lee was the perfect gentleman and the perfect boyfriend. He always gave her attention; he always made time for her. He never once broke a promise of

forgot a date. He never pushed when she said no; he accepted the limits she set without complaint. And of course, he loved her, he really did love her. But she could never bring herself to feel the same; she just didn't feel that way for him. The awful truth was that he was a temp. He was just someone to comfort her and be with until the day Sasuke finally came around. And no matter what he did for her she never gave him a real chance.

Oh, so you want to give him a chance now? Inner Sakura asked. *I don't know, maybe. Maybe? Well sure, I mean you're such a great girlfriend why wouldn't he want us back?*

Sakura was surprised that her own thoughts could make her blush. No, she hadn't been a very good girlfriend. But that would change now. She would give him a real chance now.

As she was approaching the training ground Lee's team always used Sakura was taken by surprised when Tenten and Neji seemed to pop up out of nowhere. Neji looked at her calmly but with just a hint of disapproval. Tenten was glaring at her openly and had her arms crossed over her chest.

"Are you lost Sakura?" Tenten said sweetly. "Sasuke doesn't work out with us anymore."

Sakura couldn't help but flinch a bit at the words and their truth. "Actually I'm here to see Lee-kun."

"Why? You feel like a work out and need a punching bag?" Tenten's tone was no longer sweet but openly hostile.

"Look, I don't know what Lee told you..." Sakura began.

"He didn't tell us anything." Tenten cut her off. "Lee is just too good a guy to ever say anything bad about someone, no matter how much they may deserve it. But it's obvious from his depression that he got his heart broken by you. It's also easy to tell since he usually spends

half his time talking about sensei and the other half talking about you. He hasn't mentioned your name once today. Just what the hell did you do to him?" Tenten sounded and acted a bit like a protective sister.

Sakura frowned and crossed her arms as well. "That's between Lee-kun and me."

"And Sasuke." Neji mentioned. Sakura gasped and looked guiltily over to him. Neji merely nodded. "That was an educated guess on my part but give your reaction and the sudden rise in your heartbeat my assumption was obviously correct. Sakura, while I don't share my teammate's vehemence, I agree with her that it would be best if you left Lee alone for a while."

"I really need to talk to him." Sakura said starting to get angry.

"I don't care what the hell you need. Lee needs to be left alone. How about you actually think about what's best for him for once?" Tenten demanded.

"All I want to do is apologize to him and explain."

"Why? Would it make you feel better about using him just to try and get to Sasuke?" Tenten shook her head. "Leave him the hell alone, that's the best thing you can do for him."

Now she was getting really angry. "I am going to see him so get out of my way."

"No," Tenten took a fighting stance. "You're not seeing him."

Sakura opened up her stance and began concentrating chakra in her right hand.

Fortunately before things could go further Guy was suddenly standing there between them. "Yosh, what is going on here?"

Both girls immediately answered and Guy was able to pick up the gist.

Guy nodded and looked at his two students. "You two return to training." He then turned to Sakura. "Sakura leave here, you have nothing to do with my team's training."

"But..."

He frowned down on her. "Have you come here on orders from the Hokage?"

"Uhm, no. I was just wanted to talk to Lee."

Guy shook his head. "You will not do so while he is training. This training ground has been assigned to me for my team's use. I decide who may enter it and you Sakura are not welcome." She winced at the rare coldness. Guy was one of the most exuberant and friendly men you could ever hope to meet. But there was none of that on display now. "Sakura," he spoke with complete seriousness. "It is no secret that I care a great deal for Lee's welfare. That includes his spiritual welfare as much as the physical. The fires of Lee's youth have been greatly dampened. Are you responsible?"

She swallowed and nodded.

"Then you will not interfere any further with Lee. If you wish to speak to him when he is alone I cannot control that. But as long as he is under my watch you will not speak to him. Is that clear?"

She knew better than to try and argue with him when he was concerned about Lee. "I understand." She said quietly and turned to go. "I am sorry."

Guy did not reply and simply watched her leave.

The woman smiled at them. "The house has five thousand square feet, five bedrooms, four baths, a hot springs, and sits on two acres of land. It was built only two years ago and is in excellent condition. So, what do you think?" She gave them a smile that was nearly blinding.

"How much does it cost?" Shikamaru asked.

"Three hundred thousand ryu." The real estate agent said with a straight face. "We have a great many people looking at it; it's the best property available on the market."

Shikamaru was about to question that when Temari spoke up.

"We'll take it!" Temari said happily.

"You will?" The agent said with joy counting up her commission.

"We will?" Shikamaru said in surprise.

Temari nodded. "This will be perfect to raise our family in. We can start picking out furniture and have it ready for us to move into after the wedding."

Shikamaru looked at her in surprise. "But what about my family's estate?"

Temari looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "What about it?"

"Well, as clan heir I'll be expected to live there to take care of the herd whenever I finally take over for my dad."

Temari shook her head. "That won't be happening for years yet. When the day comes we can move back if you really want to. But in the meantime we can live here and raise our family."

"Isn't it a bit much for just you me and one boy and one girl?"

Temari sent him an evil smile. "You know I've been thinking about that. I think I'd like to have a big family."

He looked at her a bit nervously. "Since when?"

She shrugged. "Since always, when you proposed I did warn you I might want more than two kids."

"Well I kind of hoped I would be able to bring you to agree with me."

She laughed. "Aw you're cute honey." She turned to the realtor and pulled out a check book. "So will you take a check?"

"Congratulations on being homeowners." Yoshino said as they sat around the dinner table. "I'll miss not having the two of you here though."

"Oh I'm sure we'll be over all the time." Temari replied happily.

"Something wrong son?" Shikaku asked. "You don't seem as happy as Temari."

In answer he looked over to his fiancé. "Temari just how many children do you want to have?" It was a very big house after all.

She grinned. "Oh nine or ten."

"What?!" Shikamaru shrieked like a little girl.

Temari got a good laugh out of that. The truth was she hoped they would have four or five, but she didn't see a reason to tell him that until later.

She'd been waiting for well over an hour by the time Lee finally approached his home. He was obviously very surprised to see her.

"Sakura-san what are you doing here?"

She frowned a bit to hear him use the formal version of her name. "I'm here to apologize to you and tell you how sorry I am Lee-kun."

He simply nodded as though it was no big deal. "I accept your apology Sakura-san." With that he continued past her towards the door to his apartment.

"Lee, can I come in so we can talk?" She asked warmly. He never said no to her. So she was rather shocked when he shook his head.

"I do not think that would be wise Sakura-san. And I would prefer it, if you would not come here again."

She stared at him. It wasn't just his words, but the neutral uncaring tone he used that shocked her. He sounded almost as uncaring as... well Sasuke. "Lee, can't you at least give me a chance to explain myself?"

He looked at her. "What is there to explain Sakura-san? You used me to aid Sasuke in a deceitful and underhanded manner." He let out a long sigh. "I suppose I am also to blame. I always knew of your feelings for Sasuke. I just believed that if I could prove myself to you that in time you might come to care for me. I hoped that I could earn just a fraction of the love you have always had for Sasuke." He shook his head. "But I should have known better. I should have known from my own feelings that love cannot be earned." He looked at her sadly. "It can only ever be given freely. Just as I gave you my love freely and you gave yours to Sasuke."

His kindness and his understanding only made her feel worse. "Lee-kun I am so sorry, I know I have treated you badly. But I really care about you. Please give me a chance to make it up to you." She pleaded.

"Do you love me Sakura-san?" Lee asked quietly.

She stared at him, that wasn't something she'd expected him to ask. "Lee I... I care about you."

He nodded. "But you do not love me." He turned away from her and pulled out his keys. "I once promised you Sakura that I would protect you with my life. A man should not go back on his word and I will not go back on mine. Should you ever need me I will be there for you. But otherwise I do not want to see you again. When I look at you now I feel only pain and heartache."

Hearing him say that to her hurt. "Lee-kun please..."

"Goodbye Sakura." Lee opened his door and entered his apartment and then shut it closed.

And just like that Sakura found herself once more all alone.

At the crossroads

66

Naruto looked nervously across the dinner table at his teammate.
"Did I do something wrong Sakura-chan?"

She looked up from her barely touched meal and shook her head.
"No Naruto-kun, everything is just fine."

He didn't believe that. She was obviously upset about something.
"Did I wait too long before treating you all to a really nice meal? Did I pick the wrong restaurant?" When Naruto had gotten his bounty money Sakura had insisted that he treat them to a really good meal that did not involve ramen. It had taken him awhile but now they were here in Konoha's most expensive restaurant. He'd expected Sakura to be really happy about this, but she'd been miserable the entire time. He was also surprised that she wasn't sitting next to Sasuke like usual. She was just sitting there lifeless between him and Kakashi. Kakashi seemed to be having a good time while Sasuke ate without comment.

Sakura sighed and gave him a false grin. "No Naruto, everything is just wonderful thank you for treating us."

"Then why aren't you happy?" He burst out. "I thought this would make you happy."

"Naruto," Kakashi spoke gently. "I don't think you're the cause of her depression."

"Then what's wrong?" Naruto asked. "Maybe I can help."

"Nothing is wrong Naruto-kun." Sakura obviously lied.

"She is mad at me dobe." Sasuke said and took another bite of his steak.

Naruto looked over to his best friend. "Huh? Why? What did you do this time teme?"

"Nothing important dobe."

"Nothing important?" Sakura looked in his direction for the first time with more than a spark of anger. "You used me!"

Sasuke tossed her one of his patented smirks. "Oh come on Sakura, it's not like you didn't get what you wanted."

Kakashi and Naruto both froze as killer intent seemed to fill the air. In an instant she was at Sasuke's side. With her left hand she pulled him up on to his feet and then with her right she hit him with all her might. "Bastard!" She screamed as she sent him flying through the air.

For Naruto he was seeing a dream he'd had since the academy come true. Sakura had finally seen teme for what he was and was giving her former crush some of the pain she had always meted out to him. *Wow! Seeing her do it to someone else is still pretty scary.*

Unlike Naruto, Sasuke had never once felt Sakura's full strength. It was a bit of a shock to him as he went flying through the air to crash into the restaurant's far wall.

Everyone in the restaurant was staring at the angry pink haired terror and cowering in fear. They were relieved when she turned and stormed out of the restaurant. Naruto and Kakashi both wanted to help, but were much too frightened to approach her as she went.

Instead they helped a woozy Sasuke back to his feet.

"I never really knew Sakura could hit like that." Sasuke said as he rubbed his jaw.

Naruto shuddered a bit at his own memories. "Teme what the hell did you do? I thought you were the only person in the whole world she

would never hit."

"I kissed her and got her to do me a favor." He shrugged.

"Exactly what sort of favor Sasuke?" Kakashi asked suspiciously.

"Hn." He stuck his hands in his pockets and slouched away.

Before either of his teammates could follow him the restaurant manager approached. "Who is going to pay for these damages?" He demanded.

Before Naruto could say anything his sensei looked at his watch. "Oh! Will you look at that? It's time for my monthly proctologist appointment. See ya." Kakashi disappeared in a swirl of wind and leaves.

Naruto grumbled even though he did have plenty of money to pay. "Worst team meal ever."

61

Shikamaru and his dad were out on the porch playing shogi.

"Say dad, we're both Jonin of the leaf village right?"

Shikaku raised an eyebrow wondering where his son could be going with this. "Yes, the last time I checked."

"So that means we are both powerful and capable ninjas who are able to face terrible dangers, right?"

"When we have to." Shikaku answered.

"We're strong and intelligent men who can handle any challenge right?"

His dad shrugged. "Sure."

"Then why are we sitting here playing shogi while the troublesome women are making all the financial decisions for the clan?"

Shikaku grinned. "Did Temari make fun of you for not being able to balance a checkbook again?"

"That has nothing to do with it." Shikamaru insisted. "Since we're the men shouldn't we be the ones making the decisions about the money?"

Shikaku grinned at his son. "Let me tell you something boy. Before I ever met your mother I took care of the clan finances. I'd spend four or five hours every month keeping track of everything. I did fine, but believe me; I didn't enjoy dealing with all the damn bills and statements. Then I married your mother.

Shikaku laughed to himself remembering how he had tried to keep her away from the financials. "She has a much better head for business and numbers than I ever did. Our clan had about 200,000 ryu in assets when that troublesome woman and I got married and now we have over a million and it's thanks to her. The bottom line son is she's better at than I am and it makes her happy to be in charge of the money and it lets me play shogi or go out with the boys instead of go blind reading numbers. So what exactly is the downside?"

Shikamaru frowned. "But don't you think the man should be the one to take care for the money?"

Shikaku shrugged. "Oh I suppose so, but are **you** going to tell Yoshino that? Because son I'm nowhere near that brave."

Shikamaru looked unhappy. "Well I don't think it's fair."

Temari crossed her arms over her chest and looked unhappy. "Well I don't think it's fair."

Yoshino sighed. "No dear I suppose it's not."

"Why are we stuck in here doing all this work every month while the men just get to play shogi or go out?" Temari demanded.

Yoshino put down the investment statement and looked over at the younger woman. "Dear I know it's not fair and I agree with you that our lazy men should be in here helping. But the problem is that if they were in here they wouldn't actually be a help and it would take eight or nine hours instead of four or five. You should have seen the mess the accounts were in when I married Shikaku. Believe me it's best that the women handle things. Trust me once you're married you'll be stuck dealing with the bills."

"And how exactly is that fair?"

Yoshino shrugged. "It's not dear. It'll just be another part of your burden as a woman."

Temari rolled her eyes in a fair impression of her fiancé.
"Troublesome."

Out on the porch the two men looked up from their game and wondered why the women were laughing so loudly.

58

Orcinus smiled at his two lieutenants. "It's set."

55

Naruto had never imagined it would be possible. But he actually missed having Sakura fawn over Sasuke-teme. That had always annoyed him, but since he had stopped chasing Sakura it had bothered him less and less. He had finally grown used to it and

accepted it in the same way you accepted the annoying habit of a friend. But now Sakura was pretending that Sasuke didn't exist and that was actually worse.

She wouldn't talk to Sasuke directly so she gave him messages to relay to, 'that heartless bastard over there.'

The first few times Naruto thought it was pretty funny. But it got annoying before too long. Sasuke refused to play the game and answered the delivered messages by speaking to Sakura. She of course pretended not to hear.

The three of them were waiting at their usual spot on the bridge. All of them standing a ways apart from one another. Surprisingly Kakashi arrived earlier than expected by being only half an hour late. He appeared in a puff of smoke holding on to his favorite little book. He took a quick look at his team and sighed.

"I see nothing has improved since the last time."

"I don't know what you mean sensei." Sakura said brightly.

"Everything seems just fine to me. Don't you think so Naruto-kun?"

He looked at her a bit nervously. "Uhm, sure?"

Sakura nodded happily. "I'm very happy to be able to go on missions with *you* Naruto. I know I can trust *you*. I know *you* would never break a promise to me."

"I never broke a promise to you Sakura." An annoyed Sasuke spoke. "You just pretended I said more than I actually did, just like always."

Sakura looked all around. "Did you hear something?"

"All right that's enough." Kakashi snapped. "I don't know what happened between you two but you're too old to be acting like children. Either behave like adults or I'll have to put you both on

report and you can stay here while Naruto and I take care of the mission."

Sasuke lifted an eyebrow. "I am not the one who has been behaving like a child."

Sakura rounded on him as though finally seeing him. "No, you've just behaved like a heartless bastard."

"It's not my fault if you *still* can't accept that I just don't feel what you wish I did." Sasuke replied calmly.

"No but it's your fault that you kissed me just to use me!" Sakura seethed.

Sasuke smirked at her. "Don't get high and mighty Sakura; I never said it was more than what it was. And I'm not the only one who used someone."

His words stung. She began approaching him menacingly. "You bastard."

He snapped into a fighting stance. "I'm not Naruto; I won't be a punching bag for you like the dobe."

"Hey!" Naruto snapped only to be ignored.

Kakashi slid in between the tow of them. "If the two of you really need to hit each other you can do it during a spar. Teammates don't fight each other outside of training." He shook his head. Was it really too much to ask to have his squad actually work as a team? "You don't have to like each other but you **do** have to work together and watch out for one another. Can the two of you do that?"

"Whatever," Sasuke muttered.

"Sure." Sakura answered.

"Lovely." Kakashi spoke without enthusiasm. "All right we have a simple retrieval mission not more than twenty miles from here. With any luck we can get done in a couple hours then we can get to a training ground and let you two spar for awhile."

They left the village and headed out. Not too long after that they came to a deserted crossroads near a small farming settlement. Both roads were completely empty as far as the eye could see.

"Kakashi-sensei," Naruto said. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

Beneath his mask Kakashi frowned. "Yes this is where we were supposed to meet our clients."

"I have a bad feeling about this." Naruto said.

And as if summoning them Itachi and Kisame appeared. Neither wore the familiar black robe with red clouds.

"Itachi!" Sasuke shouted. "You've finally come to settle things between us!"

Itachi spared him a glance. "Hello foolish little brother. No, we are not here for you." He looked to Naruto. "We have come for the Kyuubi."

Naruto actually growled as his nails dug into his palms. "You Akatsuki bastards! How I hate you."

Itachi shook his head. "We no longer serve Akatsuki."

Kakashi pulled up his hitai-ite to expose his sharingan. "If that's true, then why are you here now still going after Naruto?"

"That is the will of our new employer." Itachi answered.

"And who might that be?" Kakashi questioned.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Kisame teased as he pulled his sword off his back.

"Who gives a damn?" Sasuke cried out as chakra gathered in his palm and the chirping of birds could be heard. "Itachi! Everything I have done has been aimed towards this day. Today is the day I am finally killing you."

Itachi did not bother to look at him, instead focusing on Naruto. "Go away Sasuke, I have no time to waste with you."

Screaming with fury Sasuke rushed forward. Beginning a fight with his brother that would end in death.

Last of the Uchiha

"Sasuke no!" Sakura cried out.

With his chidori fully activated he rushed straight at his hated brother. Itachi for his part seemed to not even notice as he kept his attention locked on his target Naruto. Sasuke screamed in fury as he closed in prepared to drive his fist into his murderous older brother's heart. Kisame stood there watching with a grin; certain Itachi was in no danger.

Sure enough, at the last possible instant Itachi stepped aside. With his left hand he laid a simple chop into Sasuke exposed throat. Sasuke's attack was a clean miss and he could not change his momentum. While Itachi's simple open handed strike left him momentarily choking. Still rushing several steps more he finally let the chidori dissipate as he collapsed to the ground choking.

"Sasuke are you all right?!" Naruto shouted.

"There is no need for concern." Itachi replied calmly. "Had I wanted to kill him I could just as easily have put a kunai in his throat." Itachi turned slightly to look at Sasuke. His little brother was still choking and trying to get back up to his hands and knees. "I am disappointed in you Sasuke. After all this time I would have expected you to have improved significantly. Instead it seems your skills have actually regressed. You attempted the same maneuver in our last encounter and I easily defeated it. Now you attempt it without even using the sharingan? Pathetic."

Kakashi nodded in understanding. Without an active sharingan the straight on run the chidori required left the user wide open to counterattack. "Sasuke, without your sharingan you won't be able to face them effectively. Pull back and let the rest of us deal with them."

"No," Sasuke was finally able to speak again. He got back on his feet. "Even if I've lost the sharingan I can still kill him!"

"Lost the sharingan?" Now Itachi really was interested.

"That's right," Sasuke answered bitterly. "The seal they used to keep me in check destroyed the chakra points in my eyes. I can no longer activate the sharingan." This was news to his team as much as to Itachi and Kisame. Everyone looked shocked, except for Itachi.

"I see," Itachi said flatly. "In that case Sasuke, you are nothing to me now. I do not recognize you as a brother or even as an Uchiha. You are nothing but a weak Genin." He turned around once more and spoke without bothering to look at him. "Go away if you value your life.

Kisame laughed. "Better listen to him kid. Itachi's not the sort to give more than one warning."

"Don't worry about it Sasuke. I'll kill him for you!" Naruto ran through some hand signs. " **Taju Kage Bushin no Jutsu.**" Everyone could feel their hair standing up as the air seemed to be flowing with chakra. A massive cloud of smoke filled the crossroads. When it cleared three thousand clones filled the whole area. It was enough to make even the stoic Itachi look impressed.

"Well, I see that someone has grown stronger in the intervening years." Itachi spoke.

"He's not the only one who has gotten stronger!" Sakura focused her chakra into her fist and slammed it into the earth. The ground before her tore apart forcing Itachi and Kisame to leap away.

Kisame was laughing as he swung his sword at some incoming clones. "This might actually be a good fight!"

Itachi held five shuriken in one hand and five kunai in the other. He tossed them at the height of his leap and caused ten clones to

disappear. Many times that continued to close on him. "Indeed it may."

Kakashi leapt forward. "Remember to avoid Itachi's glance at all costs!" The Narutos and Sakura nodded as they all closed in on the enemy. Kakashi looked to where Sasuke was still standing. "Sasuke! Get back to the village and get us some support."

Even as Kakashi looked away to focus on Itachi and Kisame Sasuke glared at him. Sasuke damn well knew that by the time he could get back to the village and return the fight here would be long since over. Kakashi was trying to get rid of him because he was the weak one. He needed to be protected.

Sasuke's fists began to shake. When the hell had that happened? When had he suddenly gone from being a powerhouse to a weakling that needed to be sheltered? Never mind Naruto but even *Sakura* had surpassed him.

You are nothing to me now. I do not recognize you as a brother or even as an Uchiha. You are nothing but a weak Genin.

Itachi's words stung. He was not going to be dismissed. He was not going to be ignored. He was not going to be cheated of his rightful destiny. He was an avenger. Everything he had done had been to acquire the power he needed to kill Itachi. He was not going to just stand by and watch as his teammates fought him. He shut his eyes and opened the first two gates. He felt power flow through him. He moved to follow the others and chase down his brother.

Three hundred Narutos leapt up all at once, all of them above Itachi. As one they pulled out kunai and threw them down. Literally a rain of kunai fell; nothing in the space below could avoid being hit. A couple dozen kunai punctured Itachi. There was a puff of smoke and Itachi was replaced by a log.

"Excellent Naruto," Itachi called from the limb of a nearby tree. "You really have improved. **Phoenix Immortal Fire Technique.** " From his mouth a score of small balls of fire raced out. They struck and destroyed a number of clones. Plenty of others took their place and charged towards Itachi.

Kisame meanwhile was having a marvelous time swinging his sword and destroying wave after wave of incoming clones. "This is turning out to be a damn good workout." He saw another thirty or so clones coming straight at him. He laughed. "It doesn't matter if you have a million of them kid. I'll chop them all down!" He reared back and swung at the nearest clone.

The clone stopped and held up a hand as Samehada was about to cut him in half. To Kisame's shock the clone **caught** his blade and stopped it in midswing. "What the..." Kisame did not believe it.

There was blood and the clone momentarily disappeared in a puff of smoke. The smoke revealed Sakura grimacing in pain as she held onto Samehada. "Hurry Naruto! It's draining my chakra!"

"Right!" Thirty clones answered. Kisame was temporarily open as he stood there holding onto his sword. Thirty more clones circled in from behind. Try as he might Kisame could not pull the blade from out of Sakura's bleeding hand. Thirty fists crashed into him and sent him flying. Before he could land thirty more clones kicked him up into the air. A hundred clones leapt up to greet him. "Naruto barrage!!" They all screamed and slammed fist and feet into him.

Kisame crashed down with enough force to create a small crater. "Awww..." he groaned.

"I hope that hurt."

Kisame looked up to see a very angry Naruto standing over him. He could feel the killer intent and was certain that this was not going to end well. "Yeah it hurt. Nice play by the way, slipping in your teammate with your clones. That your idea?"

"Yeah."

Kisame nodded weakly. "You're smarter than people think."

"Thanks." He held out his palm and began gathering chakra in it.

"I never thought anyone would be strong enough to actually catch and hold Samehada."

A very slight grin touched the corners of his lips. "Sakura is amazing all right." The grin faded out as fast as it had appeared.

"You're going to kill me now aren't you?"

Naruto nodded. "Yeah I am, you'll be the second Akatsuki bastard I've killed." His hatred and killer intent spiked higher. "I'm going to kill every last one of you Akatsuki bastards!"

Kisame smiled and seemed relaxed. "I'm not with Akatsuki any more."

"But you're still chasing me because I have the Kyuubi, as far as I'm concerned that's enough."

Kisame chuckled. "Look at you, little Naruto all grown up." He laughed. "I knew I should have chopped your legs off when I had the chance."

"You should have just left me alone." Naruto said bitterly. "If you're really not Akatsuki then you should have just left me alone."

Kisame shook his head. "Sorry kid, the money was just too good to turn down."

"I hope it was worth dying for." With that he slammed the rasengan down into Kisame's neck.

Kakashi and a small army of clones were trying to corner Itachi. Kakashi intended to use his own mangekyo the moment Itachi was immobilized. From past experience he knew not to look at Itachi's eyes.

"Naruto!" Sasuke shouted as he joined the scene. "You and Kakashi stay out of this! No one kills him but me."

Some of the clones frowned at him. "Sasuke, I promised you once that if you weren't able to I'd kill him for you. All I'm doing now is fulfilling that promise."

Shame and anger filled him at being reminded of that. "When I asked you for your help I thought I was going to be executed or locked up for life." Sasuke shouted. "I don't need your help now! Stay out of it."

The clones shook their heads. "The last time when me and ero-sennin did that you wound up in a coma."

"Naruto is right Sasuke," Kakashi spoke. "So long as Itachi is defeated does it matter who does it?"

"It matters to me!" Sasuke practically shrieked. "I have to be the one who avenges my family. If someone else does it, then everything I've sacrificed over the years will have been a waste."

"Then let it be waste Sasuke." Kakashi said. "That's better than having you die for nothing."

"Listen to your sensei." Itachi spoke calmly. "He is trying to save your life."

"I don't need anyone to save me." Sasuke began to open up more of the gates. "I've lived and suffered for only one thing, to kill you brother. And today you **will die.**"

As they all watched power began to fill him to overflowing. Kakashi was the first to understand what was happening. "Sasuke stop it! You don't know what your doing!"

Three gates, four, five, and six opened. His skin became reddish and the air around him crackled with raw chakra. The feeling reminded him of the curse seal but better! There was no evil taint affecting his mind. This power was his, unlocked from within his own body. He had never opened more than two of the gates before. Lee had warned him that the more gates that were opened the more harm it would cause. Lee had also warned that opening them so many so quickly was very dangerous, especially as he had little experience with the gates. He knew the risks and was more than willing to take them if it got him his vengeance.

Kakashi was looking on in horror. *This is the secret that he used Sakura for. He must have used her to somehow convince Lee to teach him this.* When he had first seen Lee use the gates he had been shocked. Though he was sure Guy would have been very careful teaching him and taken every precaution, it was still extremely dangerous. Lee would surely have given Sasuke the same warnings Guy had given him. But would Sasuke listen?

"Sasuke you have to stop right now! The more power you draw using the gates the more dangerous it is."

"I don't care how dangerous it is," he snapped. He leapt and the tree limb he'd been standing on exploded. "Get out of the way dobe!" he went straight threw several clones that were in his way, destroying them. Just like always he would let nothing come between him and his revenge.

Moving with inhuman speed he seemed to simply appear in front of Itachi. He hit him and there was a resounding crack of bones breaking as he sent Itachi flying.

"What's going on?" Sakura and the original Naruto landed beside Kakashi. They could all sense the incredible amount of chakra coming from Sasuke. They could do nothing but watch as Sasuke was a mere blur flying through the air striking a now helpless Itachi again and again. It was like a pit bull playing with a rag doll.

"Sasuke is using the inner gates to give him the power to defeat Itachi." Kakashi answered. "And every second he uses it he puts his life into greater danger." He turned to the girl standing beside him. "Did you know about this Sakura? I know you helped him get the information from Lee. Did you know this was what he was using you for?"

She blushed in shame at the accusation in Kakashi's voice. "No sensei, all I knew was that he wanted Lee's help and Lee was unwilling to give it to him."

"And it never once crossed your mind why that might be?" Kakashi asked.

Sakura looked down in shame. "I didn't ever ask, I was just happy to help Sasuke."

Kakashi looked away from her in disappointment. "I see."

"Why is this a problem?" Naruto asked. "Guy and Lee both use this and they are fine."

"The Hokage declared this a forbidden technique much like the curse seal. The reason she did so was because she viewed it as too dangerous." Kakashi explained. "The more power you draw using the gates the more risk you put on your body and chakra system. Open all eight gates and death is certain. Open seven and death is fifty percent likely. From the power he is drawing he must have six open, which is Guy's limit as well as Lee's. Six gates can be used if you build up your stamina slowly over time, there is still a risk but it is greatly lessened if you are patient and build up to it. If you don't..."

"What?" Naruto asked nervously.

"If you haven't taken the time to build up the internal stamina then opening six gates can be almost as dangerous as opening seven." Kakashi answered quietly.

Sasuke slammed his murderous brother's broken and bleeding body to the ground. He'd done it! He'd found a way to get enough power to easily crush Itachi. He stood over his beaten foe feeling invincible.

"It's over brother." Sasuke told him. "Do you have any final words before I send you on your way to hell?"

Though in pain and aware he was about to die Itachi laughed. It was a sound that sent a shiver through Sasuke even in his moment of glory. "Send me, foolish little brother, you'll join me shortly. I killed our family, but you destroyed the clan."

"What are you talking about?" Sasuke demanded. "Now that I've dealt with you I'll start rebuilding the clan."

Itachi looked up at him and grinned. "No you won't." With his sharingan Itachi could see his brother's chakra system.

"Yes I will, but you won't be here to see it. Goodbye Itachi." And with that Sasuke delivered his killing blow.

Kakashi, Naruto, and Sakura landed near where Sasuke was still looking down on his brother's corpse.

"Sasuke, it's over, you've won, let go of the power now." Kakashi pleaded.

"Fine." Sasuke released it and let the gates close shut. His appearance returned to normal. He sent his sensei a smirk. "I

suppose you're going to tell me..." A sudden look of surprise crossed his face. He clutched at his chest and collapsed.

"Sasuke!" Sakura cried out. She got to his side and cast a diagnostic jutsu to see what was wrong.

Naruto was swiftly kneeling down on his other side. "Sakura is he all right?"

The color seemed to drain from her face. "His chakra system is collapsing I... I can't stop it." She gave Naruto a look of pain. "He's dying."

Naruto stared at her not believing it. "He can't be, Sakura-chan isn't there anything you can do?"

Tears began to leak from her eyes. "No there's not. His entire system is failing Naruto." She looked down into Sasuke's eyes. "I can't save him."

Naruto looked down at his friend as well. "You idiot!" Naruto shouted. "You baka teme why'd you have to do it?! You just had to be strong huh? You had to be cool? Was that it you stupid teme?!"

Sasuke felt pain shoot through his chest. Even if Sakura hadn't announced it he'd have known it was the end for him. Reaching up he took hold of Sakura's hand and Naruto's. He supposed it was silly, but he wanted someone to hold his hand as he died, and these were the only two people in the world who truly mattered to him.

"Stop yelling dobe, I need to tell you and Sakura something." Sasuke gasped out.

"What?" Naruto asked as his own tears began to fall.

"Naruto you're a dobe, but you're also my best friend and more of a brother than Itachi ever was. Hinata is a great girl, and for some

reason she really loves you. Try not to be too much of a dobe and screw things up o.k.? Live a happy life Naruto, you deserve it."

Naruto was stunned to hear Sasuke admit he actually cared. He couldn't choke out an answer and so just nodded.

Sasuke turned his head to look at the girl who had always been at his side. "Sakura, I'm sorry I hurt you."

"That doesn't matter now." She cried.

"No, I hurt you and I did it on purpose, for that I am truly sorry." He grimaced as the pain got much worse. Things seemed to be getting darker. "I need you to know, that I cared about you. I never showed it I know, but I cared. I'm sorry I could never return your love Sakura. Maybe I was broken the night Itachi killed my family or maybe it was my choice to never love anyone. But if I could have, it would have been you Sakura."

He gasped out in pain and squeezed both of their hands. He couldn't see anything, everything was dark. But at least he knew they were still there.

"Thank you..." his voice was a shuddering whisper. "I didn't want to die alone." He let out a breath, and that was the end.

"Sasuke!" Sakura threw her self onto his chest and simply wept.

The last of the Uchiha was now gone.

Later that day.

When Naruto stumbled back into his apartment there was humming coming from the kitchen and a familiar perfume was in the stale air. He hurried to the kitchen. There a beautiful girl was working over a large stew pot.

"Hi Naruto-kun, I was making dinner for us. How was the mission?"

Without a word he went over to Hinata and pulled her into his arms. "I love you." He whispered to her his voice cracking.

She looked at him in shock. "I love you too Naruto-kun. What happened?"

He shook his head. "I'll tell you later I promise. But I need to hold you for a while, please?" The need in his voice worried her, but she just nodded and put her own arms around him. She would stay and comfort him for as long as he needed.

Sakura knocked on the door and waited.

The door opened. "Sakura? What is it? Why are you crying?"

She took a deep shuddering breath. "Lee-kun, you said you would be there if I ever needed you. Did you truly mean that?"

Lee nodded. "Of course Sakura."

"I need you Lee-kun," she pleaded. "Will you just hold me and let me stay with you for awhile? Please?"

He just looked at her for a bit. "Sasuke is gone." It was not a question.

Sakura just nodded wearily.

Carefully he put his arms around her. "Come in and stay for as long as you like Sakura-chan."

A funeral

54

Kakashi, Naruto, Sakura, Guy, and Lee were standing before the Hokage in her office. To say the least she did not look happy.

"I have gone over Kakashi's mission report as well as the autopsy results. I have brought you all here to give me a fuller explanation of what happened."

"I beg pardon Hokage-sama." Guy spoke. "But what could this possibly have to do with myself or my extremely youthful student? Both of us were here in the village when Sasuke died." At these words Lee cast his eyes down to the floor.

"Would you like to answer that Lee or should I?" Tsunade inquired.

Guy sent his favorite student a look of concern. "Lee what is the Hokage referring to?"

Lee took a deep breath and bowed to the Hokage and then to his sensei. "I wish to apologize to both of you Hokage-sama and Guy-sensei for disobeying your orders."

"Lee, you have never once disobeyed any of my orders." Guy said with concern. "What did you do?"

Lee was facing his sensei, obviously nervous. It was also obvious he was far more worried about his sensei's reaction than the Hokage's. "Guy-sensei, Sasuke died from chakra system failure brought on by the use of the Celestial Gates."

There was dead silence in the office as Guy stared at his student. He had been the only one ignorant of the fact. "Lee, did you train Sasuke in the use of the gates?" Guy asked in a disbelieving whisper.

Lee swallowed, and then nodded vigorously. "I did Guy-sensei, Sasuke asked me to teach him and despite knowing that both you and the Hokage had forbidden it I chose to do so. I alone am responsible and ask that I be the one punished for what had happened."

"That's not true!" Sakura was immediately at Lee's side. "When Sasuke asked him Lee refused to instruct him. He only agreed because I asked him to help Sasuke. If anyone should be punished it should be me."

"So you asked Lee to teach Sasuke about the gates?" Tsunade asked.

Sakura slowly shook her head. "Sasuke asked me to get Lee to help him in any way he asked. He never told me what sort of help he meant."

"And how exactly did Sasuke get you to help him?" Tsunade inquired.

Sakura began to blush. "I'd... I'd rather not say."

"This isn't a game of truth or dare Sakura." Some anger entered Tsunade's voice. "You can't refuse to answer because you don't want to. Either answer me now or you can answer Ibiki."

Sakura flinched a bit, both at the threat and at her teacher's anger. She knew how scary Tsunade could get. "He kissed me." Sakura spoke in a bare whisper.

"What was that?" Tsunade asked.

She sent Lee a miserable glance and answered more loudly. "Sasuke kissed me." She saw the look of hurt on Lee and felt miserable.

"So Sasuke kissed you and in return you agreed to convince Lee to help him." Tsunade's voice was scathing. "Is that right Sakura?" Her apprentice nodded in shame. "And you Lee? Why did you instruct Sasuke in a forbidden technique?"

"Because Sakura asked me to." Despite his own hurt and shame Lee held his face up and answered with a firm voice. "I promised her long ago that I would always help her in any way she needed."

"And you valued this promise to Sakura above my order?" Tsunade asked.

"Hai Hokage-sama, the fire of my youth required I keep my promise no matter what."

The Hokage shook her head. "Kakashi, did you have any idea about this prior to witnessing Sasuke open the gates?"

"No Hokage-sama." Kakashi answered.

"What about you Naruto? Did you suspect anything?"

"No, baachan." Naruto said.

Tsunade glared at him and felt a vein throb in her forehead. She would yell at him later. "Very well, Sakura and Lee you can consider yourselves on report and you will be placed on 90 days restriction. Neither of you may leave the village or perform any mission above D-rank. And both of you can be extremely glad I'm feeling merciful."

"Arigato sensei," Sakura said.

"Yes, thank you Hokage-sama." Lee turned to face his sensei again. "Guy-sensei! To make up for what I have done I will one thousand miles within the village before the end of my punishment."

Guy looked at his student and shrugged. "Do not bother Lee." This answer was so completely out of character that not only Lee but everyone else stared at him.

"Who are you and what have you done with the real Guy?' Kakashi asked more than half serious.

Lee looked to be in complete shock. "Guy-sensei, if this punishment is not enough then please tell me what you think appropriate!"

Guy nodded. "Very well, your punishment shall be to lose my respect." With those words Lee looked completely crushed. Guy shook his head. "I admit that as your sensei I am at fault as well. Obviously I did not teach you the proper lessons. You should have come to me with this Lee and trusted me to help you. Instead you deliberately chose to betray not only the Hokage's trust in you, but mine as well."

And with that Guy walked out of the office.

Later that evening Kakashi found Guy drinking alone at his favorite bar. Kakashi sat down next to him at the bar and ordered a beer.

"That was a bit much what you pulled, don't you think?" Kakashi asked pleasantly.

"No, for what Lee did, it seemed most appropriate." Guy said morosely.

Kakashi really didn't like seeing Guy so depressed, it seemed unnatural. "Come on he made a mistake of judgment. It can happen, especially with a guy his age."

Guy shook his head. "Were this but a youthful indiscretion I would understand. But he deliberately went against orders from the Hokage and me. With the result that Sasuke is dead and the Uchiha clan extinct."

"Let's not put all of that on Lee. I'd say that Sasuke had an awful lot to do with that." Kakashi shook his head sadly. "He knew the technique was forbidden and deliberately manipulated both Lee and

Sakura in order to learn it. Sasuke could never give up his need for revenge no matter what I or anyone else did."

"Hai, Sasuke made his choice, but so did Lee. I truly believed that I had taught Lee better. Yet he taught Sasuke a forbidden technique."

"Which you originally taught him." Kakashi pointed out. "You're not such a bad guy and neither is Lee."

Guy put down his drink and looked directly at Kakashi. "Yes, and as I recall you told me you'd lost respect for me for doing so. I admit now that it was a mistake. One I went out of my way to keep Lee from repeating. But history does repeat it seems. For his own reasons he taught someone something that was forbidden as I did. And as I did, Lee now deserves to lose the respect of others for the choice he made."

53

When Chouji had died it had been shocking. But Sasuke's death left the entire village stunned. Just about everyone had assumed that once he'd been returned from Orochimaru's clutches everything would be fine. People had simply accepted that the Uchiha clan would be restored to greatness. So the sudden news that the last Uchiha was dead had taken the entire village unaware.

Many people had come to pay their respects to Chouji. But for Sasuke the entire village seemed to go into mourning. Just about everyone put on mourning clothes. All businesses closed for the day, not because of any official order, but because everyone simply felt it to be proper. Thousands came to lay down a flower and say good bye to someone most of them had never met.

Naruto looked at the long line of mourners and had a sad smile. He turned to Hinata. "You know the teme would have loved this, the

whole village turning out for him. Of course he would never admit it; he would sneer and pretend it didn't matter."

Hinata smiled at him and squeezed his hand. "I know how much he meant to you and how much you will miss him."

"Yeah, even if he was a teme, he was one of the very first people I created a bond with." He sighed. "And now that bond is gone forever."

"No Naruto-kun it's not." Hinata said. "The people we love, those bonds, those ties, they can never be broken." Gently she stroked his cheek, masking him blush just a bit. "Love is the one thing that even death cannot defeat. If we truly love someone that love remains even when they are gone."

He looked into the loving eyes of his sweet Hinata-chan and smiled.

Sakura placed down a white flower. Somehow it seemed fitting that the picture they had for him showed him frowning. *They probably don't have any of him smiling.* He was really gone, the boy that had been the center of all her dreams and hopes for so long. *I hope he is happy now. I hope he has found the peace in death that he never had in life.*

For a long time she had idolized him. To her mind Sasuke could do no wrong. Whenever something he did hurt her she would label it as a misunderstanding and move on. And no matter how many of those misunderstandings would pile up she would just smile and ignore them. Content in the belief that one day her perfect boy would finally see her for who she was. But then the day had come when she had seen him for who he really was. Not the imagined lonely thoughtful boy with the perfect body and poet's soul. But a wounded and proud person who could be cold and hurtful to anyone who he saw as in his way.

And even though seeing the real Sasuke had hurt her, in the end she had still loved him.

She returned to her place beside Lee and Ino. She knew what her friendship with Ino was and took comfort in that relationship. Looking at the kind boy standing next to her she didn't have a clue what she felt for him. She knew that she cared for him, about that there was no doubt. He had been kind to her and suffered because of it. His relationship with his sensei had been permanently damaged. They remained teacher and student, but the special bond they had shared seemed broken now and unlikely to ever be restored. She knew this had hurt him far more than the Hokage's punishment or anything else. And he had never said a single word in complaint, had not blamed her or tried to make her feel guilty. He cared for her and treated her as well as he knew how.

She reached out and took his hand. At the feel of her touch he turned to her and gave her a smile. Did she love him? She honestly didn't know, but she was eager to find out.

"Hey Naruto!"

Naruto and Hinata came to a halt as they were leaving the ceremony. Shikamaru and Temari were approaching them. "Hey Shika."

"Temari and I just wanted to give you our condolences on losing not just a teammate but a best friend. I know how that feels." Shikamaru said.

Naruto nodded appreciatively. "Thanks."

"Listen," Temari spoke. "Would you two like to like to join us and the family for dinner tonight?"

Naruto looked at Hinata. "Do you want to Hinata?"

"Sure Naruto-kun, it sounds like fun and it will give me, Temari and Yoshino a chance to go over some more of the details of the wedding."

"That's right, it's less than two months away." Naruto said. Something occurred to him. "Say, is it too late to change the location of the wedding?"

All three of his companions stared at him as though he were an idiot.

"Are you kidding?" Temari demanded. "Do you have *any* idea how much planning goes into a wedding and you want to change location *now* ?!"

Naruto held up his hands defensively. "Ok, ok, I was just asking."

"Naruto-kun," Hinata asked curiously. "Where would you want us to move the wedding to?"

"Oh, well there's this unused big estate that baachan is going to give me a tour of next week. "If it's nice I just thought we might use that."

"Unused big estate?" Shikamaru asked. "Well there aren't many of those in Konoha, as a matter fact I can only think of one."

"Really? Which one?" Temari asked.

"The Namikaze estates." Shikamaru replied.

"That's the one," Naruto confirmed. "Baachan says she wants to show it to me."

"Really Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked a bit excitedly. "That property is right next to my family's. I don't think anyone has been allowed on it since the Yondaime died. If the Hokage is going to show it to you do you think I could come too? I've always wanted to see it."

"Sure Hinata-chan!" Naruto agreed eagerly. He was always happy to have her with him whatever the occasion.

"Naruto, why exactly is the Hokage showing you this property?" Shikamaru asked.

"Oh, well I'm not really sure but she said something about giving it to me as a birthday present." Naruto had walked another five steps before noticing he was alone. When he stopped and turned around he saw that Hinata, Shikamaru, and Temari were all staring at him with open mouths.

"What?" Naruto asked.

A really big house

Author's Notes: Sorry that it has been awhile. All I can say is that I have been consumed with other stories. However now that I have finally wrapped up A Mother's Love and gotten a few requests to get back to this one it's time to finish up the Invitation series.

46

When Naruto arrived at the tower he had Hinata, Shikamaru, and Temari all in tow. Tsunade was not exactly pleased to have the additional guests but she agreed that they could come along too.

Surprisingly enough it was Hinata who was the most excited to get a tour of the Namikaze estates. Growing up on the neighboring Hyuga estates she had been able to glimpse the top third of the Namikaze mansion. The knowledge that it was now a forbidden place where the legendary Yondaime had lived had made it a place of wonder to her as a child. Now she was actually going to see what it was really like from the inside.

At the main gate to the estates was a large sign warning that these lands were off limits and trespassers were liable to arrest by the ANBU. Tsunade removed a special key and unlocked the gates allowing them to enter. Once they were all on the other side she relocked them. As they began to go up the gravel walk way Naruto was glancing at the trees and plants on either side of them. It looked like pure forest. He even spotted a couple rabbits ducking for cover.

"Everything seems kind of overgrown and wild." He mentioned.

Shikamaru grinned at him. "Well I doubt there have been any gardeners here for the last sixteen years."

Tsunade nodded. "That's right. No one has been allowed here since the estate was sealed just after the Yondaime's death."

Shikamaru glanced at the Hokage. "Which kind of brings up the question of why we're here now."

"You three are here because Naruto invited you. Naruto is here because I plan on giving him this property and I thought a tour was in order first. If Naruto agrees to accept it I intend to have gardeners, electricians, and plumbers come here and work under ANBU supervision to get it ready."

Naruto looked a little embarrassed. "You know baachan that's really nice of you and all, but I don't think that Hinata and I really need you to give us a whole mansion. I mean with my bounty money I can get us a really nice house somewhere."

Tsunade smiled at him. "But Naruto, Hinata grew up in a mansion on a grand estate. Don't you want to give her the same sort of lifestyle? And if you live here she will be right next to her clan."

Naruto nervously looked over at Hinata. "Would you like to live here Hinata-chan?"

They were walking hand in hand. She smiled at him and gave his hand a little squeeze. "Naruto-kun I would be happy living anywhere as long as we were together." She paused. "But you know it might be nice to live here. Why don't we take a look and decide later?"

There was nothing in the world he wouldn't do to make her happy so he nodded immediately.

As they continued up the walkway Shikamaru mentioned something casually. "You know Hokage-sama when Temari came to stay with my family a few years ago my parents asked about buying these estates. They were told the property was being held in trust and was not available for sale."

Tsunade looked at him. "That's true."

"Well the interesting thing about being held in trust is that it suggests that there is a rightful owner out there who will eventually claim said property. And of course since this is the hereditary property of the Namikaze that means only a member of that clan would be able to lay claim to it." Shikamaru said in an equally casual tone.

Temari looked very surprised. "I thought there were no more Namikaze. Wasn't your Yondaime the last of his line?"

Naruto looked really excited. "Does that mean there is a relative of the Yondaime's still alive? Do you think I could meet him?"

Tsunade looked a bit uncomfortable. "I can't really discuss it right now Naruto."

"Does that mean there *is* a member of the Namikaze clan still alive?" Hinata said hopefully.

"I can't discuss this matter right now." She sent Shikamaru an annoyed look.

Clearing a bend in the walkway they suddenly got a clear look at the mansion. It was a three story building made of grey granite and white marble.

"Wow!" Naruto shouted at his very first glance. "What an amazing place! It's huge!" Having grown up in a cramped three room apartment he couldn't even imagine living in such a place.

Hinata could, of course, and she also looked excited. "I think it's even larger than the Hyuga estate."

"It is very impressive." Temari agreed.

"And you're going to just give this to me? For free?" Naruto said not believing it.

Tsunade nodded. "That's right; everything including the personal property inside the mansion will belong to you."

"You're not worried at all about the rightful owner returning one day to lay claim to all this?" Shikamaru said pleasantly and with a knowing smile.

Tsunade glanced at him. "You know Shikamaru I suddenly recall that I have a terrible back log of D-rank missions that I really need to clear. Maybe I could assign a few of them to you. One involving garbage collection comes to mind. What do you think?"

"Ah, I'd really rather not."

"Then maybe you should keep your observations to yourself." She said sweetly. She looked at Naruto. "You ready to see the inside? The mansion has every amenity including an indoor pool, a private dojo, and even a family library with a collection of jutsu scrolls."

"Scrolls?!" Naruto practically jumped into the air.

"Easy boy," she motioned for him to calm down. "Nothing belongs to you yet, not until your sixteenth birthday. But I can show you what's here."

"Well come on then!" he dragged Hinata with him as he was eager to get a look at those scrolls.

Laughing Tsunade followed after. Shikamaru and Temari hung back a bit.

"Now what was all that about?" Temari asked.

"What?" Shikamaru replied.

Temari gave him a suspicious look. "Don't play dumb, why were you asking about the Namikaze?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "Don't you find it a bit suspicious? This estate has been sought after by everyone who has the money to buy it. Yet it has been kept off the market being held in trust, even though there are supposedly no people with a claim to it. Now all of a sudden the Hokage is just going to hand over this incredibly valuable piece of property to Naruto."

Temari shrugged. "Tsunade probably just decided that no one was ever going to inherit it. And you know how much she cares about Naruto. She probably figures this is a way for the village to make up for all the grief he had to take his whole life. After all he is performing a great service for the village and has been since the day he was born. And I also wouldn't be surprised if she promised to do this to convince Hiashi to agree to let him marry Hinata."

Shikamaru frowned a bit. "I suppose that's possible." He admitted.

"But you think there's something else don't you?"

Naruto suddenly shouted to them from the doorway to hurry up.

"Come on," Shikamaru said. "Let's not miss the tour."

The mansion did not fail to impress. The furniture had been covered with wraps. Removing some the girls had been excited to see the dark oak wood and the magnificent craftsmanship. Hinata fell in love with the massive dining room while Temari really liked the spacious kitchen. Naruto was excited to see his very own dojo complete with weights and training equipment. When they entered the library Shikamaru took a quick look at some of the titles sitting on the hundreds of shelves.

He turned to Naruto. "O.k., either you're letting me borrow some of these books or I'm moving in here."

Naruto gave him a roll of his eyes. "Hey baachan where are the jutsu scrolls?"

Naruto had wanted to take five or six of the scrolls with him immediately. Tsunade had been forced to slap them out of his hands.

"When you turn sixteen they're yours," Tsunade explained yet again. "But until then they remain here under lock and key."

"But that's a whole month away!" He whined. "Can't I just take one?"

"No!" Tsunade began to crack her knuckles and Naruto's preservation instinct kicked in. He dropped it.

When the tour of the mansion was complete they went out back. Behind the mansion were a large pond and a rose garden. The roses had grown wild over the years and cover the benches and paths that had been near their bushes. Hinata didn't mind, she loved flowers and the roses were all in full bloom. Temari was also enchanted and asked if she could take some samples to add to her own garden.

"So what do you think Naruto?" Tsunade asked certain of the answer. "Would you like to live here?"

"Yes I would baachan!"

"Damn it Naruto stop calling me that!" She shook her head. Why did he have to annoy her when she was going out of her way for him? "All right I'll have people start preparing things. This mansion will be ready and waiting for you on the day you turn 16."

As they were leaving Shikamaru hung back and asked to talk to Tsunade.

"Something on your mind Shikamaru?" Tsunade asked suspiciously.

"When are you going to tell him?"

"Tell him what?"

"That he is the Yondaime's son." He pushed on before she could deny it. "It's obvious to me now. The reason this estate was kept in trust was because there was a legitimate heir. And he's been living here this entire time, only he couldn't legally inherit until he was of age. You're not giving Naruto a gift; you're giving him his inheritance. That means he is Namikaze, and since the Yondaime was the last of his clan that means he *must* be the Yondaime's son."

Tsunade had a look of rye admiration as she slowly shook her head. "He will find out everything on the day he turns 16. Until then this is all and S-rank secret. Breathe one word of this to anyone and you'll be doing D-rank missions for the rest of your life."

"But why make him wait? He's been dying to know about his family his whole life."

"There are reasons Shikamaru. As hard as his life has been it would have been much harder had he known the truth. There are plenty of people both inside and outside this village who had scores to settle with Minato and would have tried to settle them with Naruto. Everything that was done was done for his sake."

Shikamaru looked off in the direction where Naruto was excitedly talking to Hinata. He began laughing.

Tsunade looked at him in surprise. "Something funny?"

"I just realized that the head of the Namikaze clan is about to marry the heiress of the Hyuga clan. That's the sort of match I can imagine Hiashi would have tried to arrange. I wonder if he has any idea how he lucked out."

Flashback

Hiashi was staring at the documents and then looking up at her clearly not believing.

"Is this some sort of trick?"

Tsunade shook her head. "Those documents bear the signature and seal of the Fourth Hokage. They are real enough."

Hiashi looked back down at them. "Then that demon boy..."

"Watch your mouth," Tsunade said sharply.

Hiashi looked up again slightly discomforted. "My apologies, that *boy* is truly the son of Namikaze Minato?"

"He is," Tsunade confirmed. "He is also sole heir to the entire Namikaze estate and fortune. When he turns sixteen he will inherit everything including the seat on the council, the estate, the family scrolls, and the fortune which is now valued at over a quarter of a billion ryu." Tsunade grinned. "I believe that's more than you have?"

"Yes," Hiashi answered softly his eyes glittering.

"He will be the single richest man in Konoha, and except for the Fire Lord himself the richest in all of Fire country. And you will be able to call him, 'son.' Assuming of course you relent and agree to allow him to see your daughter."

He turned to look out the window of his study. In the distance he could see the top of the Namikaze mansion. "Well, who am I to stand in the way of true love?"

Tsunade grinned. "Oh I think he has some idea."

The ambush

34

The Hokage had been keeping him busy of late, and when Tsunade didn't need him Temari always had something for him to do. Today was his first day in a week without an assignment. He had taken advantage of it. At the moment he was lying underneath his favorite tree atop his favorite hill. Though it was fall the weather was still just fine if you had a jacket on. He was watching the clouds and just beginning to doze off.

"Hey lazy! Wake you ass up!"

Shikamaru opened both eyes to see his beloved climbing up the hill with what looked a big plastic cooler.

"Hey Temari, did you bring lunch?" It was a still a bit early, but lunch followed by an extended make out session seemed like a nice way to pass the time. He was surprised when she shook her head.

"Not this time lazy. This," she held out the cooler. "Is part of a mission the two of us have been assigned."

He let out a groan. "The Hokage promised me I'd have today off, she really is trying to work me to death you know."

Temari laughed at that. "Well knowing you it wouldn't take much. Now get up we've been assigned a delivery mission."

He complained some more, but got up. "So what are we delivering? Human organs for transplant? Perishable medical supplies?"

Temari had another long laugh. "Not even close! Here, take a look." She promptly opened the top of the cooler."

He leaned in and grimaced at what he saw. "Ew!"

Temari shook her head as she put the lid back on. "Ew? What sort of ninja are you?"

"I'm the kind that doesn't like fish." That was true, both he and his father just didn't care for any sort of fish.

"Well, being from the desert I don't have a taste for it either. But we're supposed to deliver it, not eat it, so we should be fine."

"Wait a minute; the Hokage assigned two Jonin to deliver a *fish* ?" It was a big fish, at least ten pounds, but still... "Are you sure this is a real mission? It sounds more like one of Naruto's old pranks."

In response Temari handed him the mission order. "I got that from the Hokage herself not ten minutes ago."

Shikamaru looked at the order carefully. The signature and seal certainly looked authentic. And he and Temari were specifically named on it. "We're to bring this to Otsu? That's a little village less than fifty miles from here. We can get there in less than an hour."

"Good, since it's almost eleven and the mission specifically requires completion of delivery before noon. Something wrong?"

He was grimacing. "There's something familiar about this village, something I can't quite remember."

"Is it dangerous?" Temari asked.

"No, it's just a little town in the middle of nowhere." He frowned. "But there's something about it..."

"Well if it's important I'm sure it will come to you. Now here," she handed him the cooler. "You can carry the fish."

"Troublesome."

Flying through the forest was actually rather pleasant, but something kept bothering Shikamaru.

"Why would the Hokage assign such a mundane mission to the two of us? It makes no sense. Any Genin could handle this."

Temari looked at him and smiled, he was cute when he was flustered. "Well, maybe you had it right on your first guess. Maybe this is part of Tsunade's fiendish plot to do you in through overwork."

Shikamaru sent her a flat look "You're not helping you know."

"Maybe she was just wanting to give us a chance to be alone." Temari said.

Shikamaru gave her a knowing smirk. "That's what our hotel suite is for."

She tried to sound outraged. "Is that all I am to you?"

"Of course not," he answered. "You're also a really good cook."

She wanted to sound upset but couldn't quite keep the amusement out of her voice. "Why do I put up with you?"

"Because you're madly in love with me of course."

"Well the first half is right anyway."

They arrived at the small town without incident and were soon found the client's address. It was a fairly nice one story house with a well kept lawn. They could smell cooking coming from the house as they approached the doorway.

It was the smell of cooking that did it. Suddenly what Shikamaru had been trying to remember all came back to him. He came to an abrupt halt just before reaching the front porch.

"What's wrong?" Temari asked him.

He gave her a look of doomed resignation; his eyes told her all hope was lost. "We've been tricked," Shikamaru said in a weak tone. "This is an ambush."

In just seconds she'd leaped back from the house and opened her fan. Her eyes darting about. "Do you see enemy ninja?" She was surprised that Shikamaru was still rooted to the spot. She was even more surprised to see him still holding onto the cooler.

"It's not that sort of ambush Temari," he said in a resigned voice. "It's much, much worse."

She was about to ask him what the hell he meant when the door to the house creaked open. There in the doorway was a little old man who had to be in his late sixties at least. He was stooped over and had thick glasses that might have been made from the bottom of some bottles. He also had on the most horrendously ugly yellow kimono she'd ever seen. She was wondering how such a frail little man could be any sort of threat.

She promptly found out.

The man eyed Shikamaru for a moment, and then held out his arms. "Well Shikamaru? Aren't you going to give your grandfather a hug?"

"Of course, ojiisan." Shikamaru set down the cooler and carefully gave the man a hug. "It is good to see you ojiisan."

"Really?" The man asked. "If it is so good you should come and visit me on occasion. I have not moved anywhere in the past ten years. You have been all the way to Suna, but you cannot seem to find your way to Otsu unless I pay for it."

Shikamaru looked a bit embarrassed and began to rub the back of his head. "I'm sorry about that honorable grandfather; I've just been very busy."

"Yes, busy looking at clouds no doubt, just like that father of yours." The old man sighed. "Yes, that is much more important than seeing your poor old grandfather who could pass away at any moment. It is good you have your priorities in order."

Shikamaru grinned weakly. *Why didn't I run away when I had the chance?* "I was expecting to see you at the wedding, you are still coming aren't you honorable grandfather."

"Have I ever missed a wedding of one of my children or grandchildren? I just wanted to meet my future granddaughter before the wedding." He looked past Shikamaru to the young woman standing in his walkway. "Are you going to introduce us Shikamaru?"

"Of course, honorable grandfather, this is Sabaku no Temari, the daughter of the Fourth Kazekage and sister to the Fifth and the most troublesome and amazing woman in the world. She also happens to be the woman I love with all my heart."

Shikamaru then turned to Temari. "Temari, this is my maternal grandfather Hotono Hatsu, he was a famous chef and still owns several restaurants in Konoha."

Temari gave the man a very deep and respectful bow. "I am honored to meet you sir. Your daughter Yoshino has told me all about you."

He nodded. "I'm sure she has, but I am not as bad as she makes me out to be. She has also written to me quite a bit about you." He held out his index finger and began to turn it round and round. Temari stared at him having no idea what was going on.

The old man sighed. "Turn around please."

"Excuse me?" Temari asked.

"I would like you to turn around so I can get a look at you from the back and front."

Temari sent Shikamaru a questioning look. He just gave her a weary nod. So she slowly turned all the way around for him.

The man stood there and nodded. "My daughter was right; you have big tits, wide hips and a big ass." He turned to Shikamaru. "I guess your mother was right, you like women with plenty of curves."

Temari was staring at the man with her jaw hanging wide open. She suddenly had a very strong suspicion as to where Yoshino got her personality from. "What did you just say?"

He looked back at her and shouted. "I SAID YOU HAD BIG TITS WIDE HIPS AND A BIG ASS." He brought his voice back down to a more reasonable volume. "My daughter didn't mention anything about you being hard of hearing."

He turned back to Shikamaru. "Your mother also tells me the two of you have been going at it like a pair of spring hares the last few months. Since you're a ninja shouldn't you have a little more self control?"

Shikamaru was turning red and struggling to say something, anything, coherent.

His grandfather then turned back to Temari. "So is it true that the two of you have been having sex in the house even when his parents are right downstairs?"

Her jaw was still hanging open. Inside Inner Temari was screaming and tearing her hair out. *What is wrong with this family?! They're all insane!* Growing up with her brother Gaara she had assumed her family to be the most dysfunctional one possible. But at least Gaara had the decency to just kill you. He never forced anyone to discuss their sex life out in public.

"Ojiisan," Shikamaru mercifully interrupted. "What about this fish we brought you?"

The old man looked at the cooler and nodded. "That will be the main course for lunch; I've already prepared all the side dishes."

Shikamaru blanched. "Ojiisan, you know I don't like fish."

"Just like your father," the old man complained. "I am a master chef; you will enjoy it, now go in and sit down." Resigned to his fate Shikamaru entered the house.

He turned his attention back to a now wary Temari. "Yoshino tells me you know how to cook. Do you know how to prepare fish?"

"Ah, not really, neither Shikamaru nor I really care for it."

"In that case it's high time you learn." The man picked up the cooler and opened the door.

"You know that's really not..." Temari began.

The little old man gave her a look that immediately silenced her. "Let's go girl, you're learning how to cook fish today."

She simply nodded and headed up the porch steps. Shikamaru was right, this was worse than being ambushed by ninja.

Yoshino and Shikaku were snuggled up on the sofa. Shikaku took a look at the clock and grinned.

"Right about now the two of them are having to eat some of that damn fish your dad loves to make." Shikaku said.

Yoshino shook her head. "Dad's a good cook, you just don't like fish."

"Neither do the kids." Shikaku pointed out.

"Well the meal's the best part, after that dad will start telling them the story about starting his first restaurant, and then of course the slides."

Shikaku shuddered in remembered dread. "Do you feel a little guilty forcing the two of them to go through that?"

Yoshino shook her head. "Nope, we had to endure it. So did all my brothers and sisters and the people they married. So have all the kids who have gotten married so far. It's a right of passage into this family."

"It seems kind of cruel," Shikaku pointed out.

"It will build character and strengthen their ties."

"I suppose," he paused for a bit. "You know I can think of something else that strengthens ties." He gave her a knowing grin. "And unlike being with your dad it's actually fun."

Smiling she gave him a quick kiss and jumped off the couch. "I'll race you upstairs."

Four long, long, hours after arriving they were finally permitted to go. Once they were safely out of hearing range Temari turned and looked at her fiancé.

"Shikamaru I love you with all my heart. I want to spend my life with you and grow old together. I want us to have a huge family and share all the joys and heartaches of family life. In other words, you are my whole life. **But,** " her eyes darkened dangerously. "If you ever ask me to go through that again I'll bury you in sand and take the children with me to Suna."

Shikamaru nodded. "Temari, if I ever suggest doing that you can go ahead and kill me because I'm either an imposter or possessed."

As they headed back to Konoha they discussed ways to avoid granddad at the wedding reception.

They also agreed that Tsunade would be seated right next to him.

A new last name

Shikamaru, Shikaku, and Yoshino were all seated at the dinner table and looking a bit nervous.

"Well dear," Yoshino said. "You called for a family meeting. What do you want to discuss?"

Temari nodded. "Well, you already know that my family will be arriving in a couple of weeks for my wedding." The three of them all nodded.

"Gaara, Kankuro, and Matsuri have always been on the guest list." Shikaku said.

"Well, about that," Temari hesitated.

"Yes?" Yoshino encouraged.

Temari took a deep breath. "Well, Gaara and Matsuri will be staying at a hotel. But Kankuro wants to stay here in the house."

"What? Why?" Shikamaru asked, clearly not happy with the news.

"Well, to be honest, I think he just likes having people to annoy."

"Wonderful," Shikamaru muttered.

"Shikamaru," Yoshino said sharply. "Whatever you may think of him Kankuro will be your brother in law soon. You need to think of him as family." She turned to Temari. "Of course he can stay here, we have a spare bedroom and he will be more than welcome."

"Thank you Yoshino."

"No problem, how much trouble could he be?"

Temari just stood there and did not say another word.

13

They had made love.

Now spent and sweaty they lay together underneath the sheets. Naruto leaned over and nibbled on her neck.

Hinata giggled and gently pushed him back a little. "Stop, that tickles."

Smiling he put his hand on her thigh. "Is my little Hinata-chan ticklish?" He knew and loved every inch of her sweet tender body. He began running her fingers over her upper thigh and she began laughing.

"Stoooooop," she laughed. "Please stop."

He did finally stop tickling her and instead settled for just wrapping his arms around her. "Tomorrow is a big day."

Hinata snuggled close to him. "I know, you'll be sixteen and we'll be moving into the Namikaze estates."

"Yeah," he gave her a soft kiss. "And a couple weeks after that we'll be married."

She nodded and gave him a kiss of her own. "Don't forget you have that meeting with the Hokage tomorrow morning."

He groaned. "I know, baachan says it's important, but I bet she just ends up telling me not to make a mess of our new home."

Hinata shut her eyes and smiled. *Our new home.*

As soon as he entered her office he knew something was up. Baachan had a serious look on her face and ero-sennin was there too. When Jiraiya looked serious that was usually a bad sign.

"What's going on?" Naruto asked.

Tsunade took a deep breath. "Naruto, since you are sixteen now you are officially of an age to inherit and as such it is my duty to give you your birthright."

"Birthright? Baachan what are you talking about? I'm an orphan."

Tsunade took a sealed document and held it out to him. "Read this Naruto, and you will understand."

He took the document from her. There was a simple wax seal. Stamped into the seal was a spiral with four stars above. Naruto recognized it as the personal symbol of his hero, the Yondaime Hokage. "What is this?"

Tsunade swallowed. "It's a letter to you, from your father."

His face snapped up. "My father?" Tsunade nodded. "What does it say?"

"I don't know, it was sealed sixteen years ago. It was meant for you and no one else has read it."

"My father," he looked down and saw his hands were shaking.

"It's all right Naruto," Jiraiya said. "Your father loved you very much. Go ahead and read it I guarantee there is nothing bad in it."

"Wait a second! Ero-sennin did you know my father?!" Jiraiya calmly nodded.

"We both knew your parents." Tsunade said.

"What?!" he looked between the two of them with obvious hurt. "You mean you've both known all this time who I really am? Who my parents are? What happened to me? How could you not have told me?!" He demanded.

"There were reasons kid," Jiraiya said.

"Read the letter Naruto," Tsunade repeated. "And you will understand."

Naruto looked back down at the letter and the wax seal. *This is a letter from my father. Why did you leave me?* With his thumb he broke the seal and opened it.

My dearest son,

As I write these words to you the Kyuubi nears the village and I have only minutes to give you this message. You will not be given this letter until you are sixteen and ready to take your rightful place within the village hierarchy. When you read this I will be long dead and I fear that despite my hopes you will have grown up lonely, though I hope not alone. I had hoped your mother would be there for you, but she is gone now and I am soon to follow. Your mother's name was Uzumaki Kushina of the village hidden within the Whirlpool. She died shortly after your birth, but she lived long enough to hold you in her arms and to know that you would live. She loved you to the very end my son. We both loved you and wanted only to be with you.

But there are times when the wishes of two people simply do not matter. I am sure that you must be aware of the burden that was placed on you. I have done you a terrible injury my son and for that I must beg your forgiveness. I can only imagine the pain you have suffered because of it. I have asked that you be seen as a hero and I can only pray that the village will honor this request. But even if they do, I fear you will suffer. Please forgive me and know my decision was the only one possible. It was the only way to prevent the destruction of the entire village. If you have wondered why you were chosen to bear this burden, it is because you are my son, blood of

my blood, and I fear it falls on our family to make the sacrifices necessary to preserve Konohagakure. For you are the last member of the Namikaze clan.

Naruto stopped reading and sucked in his breath. "Namikaze?" he whispered.

I am Namikaze Minato, the Yondaime Hokage, and head of my clan. You are Namikaze Naruto, that is your true name and who you truly are. Forgive me that you were not told the truth sooner. Unfortunately I have made many enemies and if the truth were known you would be placed in grave danger. That is why the truth is being revealed to you only now. I am certain that by now you are a powerful ninja and a strong man, and ready to take your rightful place. Your safety depends on secrecy and only three people know the truth; Sarutobi, Jiraiya, and Tsunade. Even my own students, even the Council will not know the truth before you do. I will leave behind the necessary documents to ensure you receive your inheritance. All that I have, all that I am, is yours now. Do with it as you will.

And please never doubt my son, that your mother and I loved you very much and wanted you more than anything in the world. I pray that you are well and that you find it in your heart to forgive me. I love you son.

Namikaze Minato,

Yondaime Hokage

She saw his tears begin to flow and the letter slipped out of his fingers. She came out from behind her desk to try and comfort him. She was surprised to see that though he was crying he was also smiling.

"They... they loved me." He choked out. He had always wondered. He had always been afraid that they had abandoned him. That they

had hated him the way so many others had. But they hadn't, they had loved him, and left him only because of death. He looked up at Tsunade through his tears and smiled. "They really did, they really loved me."

She put her arms around him and comforted him. "Yes they did Naruto; they both loved you very much."

It was awhile before he was able to get over the shock. After sixteen years he knew who he was, and he knew what had happened to his parents and why he'd been the one chosen. And he was really the Yondaime's son. That just didn't seem real. He'd spent his whole life looking up to the Yondaime as his hero. And now the man turned out to be his father. It just didn't seem possible.

After the shock and the tears had worn off he was able to at least try and talk more rationally.

"So what happens now?"

"Well, I am going to announce publicly that you are the son and heir of Namikaze Minato. You inherit the entire Namikaze fortune."

"The mansion, the scrolls, the estates, that's the reason you were giving me all of them."

Tsunade nodded. "That's right, they're all a part of your inheritance, but there's much more."

"She aint kidding kid," Jiraiya pointed out. "As of right now you are the richest man in this whole village."

"You are also head of the Namikaze clan and automatically a member of the council." Tsunade laughed. "Congratulations Naruto-sama."

"Naruto-sama?" The words just didn't sound right. "I'm no sama."

"You are kid, though I'll never call you that." Jiraiya said. "You are a clan head and a council member, that makes you as much of a sama as Hiashi."

The mention of Hiashi brought Hinata to mind. "Baachan, can I ask a favor?"

"Of course."

"Please don't announce this until tomorrow, delay it just one day."

Tsunade looked confused. "But why? I thought you'd be thrilled and shouting to let everyone know whose son you are."

"I am baachan," he told her. "I'm going to start using my father's name and I'm going to try and be worthy of being his son. But I want to be plain old Uzumaki Naruto for just one more day."

"Well, if that's what you want brat I guess there's no harm in it."

That day he went to his new home to find a huge banner that read, 'Happy Birthday Naruto' on it.

Inside the birthday party that Hinata had arranged kicked off with his arrival. It made him very happy to see all his precious people and friends there. These were the people who truly cared about him. He knew that starting tomorrow people who had despised him would look at him differently simply because they knew his real last name. He was sure he would deal with them politely, but always suspect their motivations. The people who were here now were the ones who truly mattered and the ones who truly cared for him.

He was happy to see Iruka-sensei and Kakashi-sensei. He went over and talked to Sakura and was glad to see her feeling a bit better. He talked to Lee but couldn't manage to convince him to talk to Sakura. He talked to Temari and Shikamaru about, what else, wedding details. Konohamaru told him about his latest C-rank mission. He

tried talking to Ino, but she soon left after wishing him a happy birthday. He talked to Kiba and Shino and Neji and everyone else who had come to help him celebrate.

But more than anyone else it was Hinata he wanted to be with. Most of the party was spent dancing or just talking to his darling girl.

When the party was over and everyone else had left Hinata went over to him and hugged him.

"Did you not like the party Naruto-kun?"

"What? Are you kidding Hinata-chan? It was great, thanks for throwing it for me."

"Is anything wrong Naruto-kun? You've seemed a little off all day."

He smiled and kissed her. "I found out some really important information from the Hokage today."

"Can you tell me what it is?"

He nodded. "I'll tell you all about it Hinata-chan." He paused a moment. "Hinata-chan, would you love me more if I came from a good family or from a respected clan?"

She immediately shook her head. "Of course not Naruto-kun, I love you with all my heart already, I couldn't love you more. Naruto-kun, it has never mattered to me where you came from or that you lack a family name. I love you for who you are, that is all that matters."

Smiling he kissed her. "I love you Hinata-chan."

"And I love you Naruto-kun," she said happily. "So what did the Hokage tell you?"

He took her into his arms and kissed her as he slowly began to unzip her dress. "I'll tell you later."

The Day

7

Standing near the gate people who saw him smiled and bowed. Naruto gave them a polite little nod. It was bizarre. For most of his life people had hated him for reasons beyond his control. And now those very same people were eager to show him kindness for no better reason than his name.

"What's wrong Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked. "You've always wanted to have the villagers acknowledge you."

He nodded. "That's true Hinata-chan, but I always wanted to earn that acknowledgement by proving what a great ninja I was and becoming Hokage." He stared at the people as they were walking away. "What does it matter if they only respect me because of my name?"

Hinata nodded sympathetically. Having grown up as the heiress to the prestigious Hyuga clan she understood. "I agree Naruto-kun, people should not treat you differently simply because of your name."

Naruto looked over to where Kakashi, Sakura, Temari, and Shikamaru were standing. It wasn't only strangers who had treated him differently.

Four days earlier.

There had been a loud and incessant pounding on his front door. When Naruto had answered it he'd been surprised to see Kakashi and Sakura standing there.

"Naruto! Is it true?" Kakashi had shouted excitedly.

"Huh?"

Kakashi grabbed him about the shoulders and began shaking him back and forth. "The Hokage just made an announcement that you are Minato-sensei's son. Is that true?"

"Uh, yeah it is, he was my father." Naruto gave Kakashi a weak grin. Seeing him so excited was kind of scary.

"That's wonderful!" Kakashi grabbed Naruto in a crushing embrace. "Naruto you have no idea how happy this makes me! It's as if a part of Minato-sensei is alive again!"

"Ah, Kakashi-sensei?" Hinata spoke up.

"Yes Hinata?"

"I think you're smothering him."

Kakashi suddenly realized that while hugging Naruto he was pressing his face into his chest. He immediately let go. "Oops, sorry about that. Listen Naruto, I knew your father very well. He was my beloved sensei and like a second father to me. If you'd like I could tell you stories about him, and about your mother as well."

Naruto needed a minute just to breathe. But he then grinned. "I would really like that Kakashi-sensei."

Sakura then stepped carefully forward and was staring a bit wide eyed at him. "So it's true? You really are the Yondaime's son and the last Namikaze?"

Smiling he rubbed the back of his head. "Well yeah, but I won't be the last Namikaze for very long. When Hinata-chan marries me she'll be Namikaze too, and our children will be as well."

Sakura was looking at him with a weird faraway expression in her eyes. "It's so romantic, the son of our greatest hero and last survivor of his clan." Sakura seemed to blush just a bit and took a step

towards him. "You know Naruto-kun if I had known this back in our academy days I might have..."

"What? Treated him the way you did Sasuke?" Hinata slid in front of Naruto as though shielding him. "Would you have chased him shamelessly if only his last name had been Namikaze instead of Uzumaki?" Hinata's words had a rare coldness to them.

"What? No, of... of course not." Sakura took a step back

"But you would have treated him differently back then if you'd known who he really was?"

"Well of course I would have," Sakura replied truthfully. "I mean everyone would have acted differently if we'd known whose son he was."

Hearing her say that Naruto just shook his head. He liked Sakura, he considered her to be more than a teammate. She was one of his dearest friends. But hearing her say that he was forcefully reminded of how she had *really* been back then. Whenever she had yelled at him or hit him or just ignored him he had always excused it. He had always believed that if she ever knew the real him she would really like him. And now here she was freely admitting that he could have been the exact same person, but if his name had been different that would have been enough to earn him much better treatment.

He had always thought it a shame that Sakura had never given him a single chance back then. Now he was glad for the fact.

Temari and Shikamaru also dropped by later that day.

"Wait a second! You knew?" Naruto sounded outraged.

"That's right," Shikamaru said in his usual bored tone.

"For how long?" Naruto asked.

"I figured it out when we took the tour of this place. I knew that if the Hokage was giving it to you it could only be because you were the legitimate heir."

"And you kept this a secret why exactly?" An annoyed Temari asked.

Shikamaru gave her a look of surprise. "Because the Hokage told me to."

Temari's left eye began to twitch violently. "When we get home we are having a very long discussion about keeping secrets from your wife."

Shikamaru smirked. "Well technically you're not my wife yet."

"Watch it lazy, or I might never be your wife."

It made Naruto very happy to see that Shikamaru and Temari were treating him the same as always

Of course of all the reactions he'd received Hinata's had been his favorite.

After making passionate love to her for a few hours (stamina) he had revealed everything to her. He had been surprised at her reaction. She had actually seemed disappointed to learn that he was the son of the Fourth.

"Is something the matter Hinata-chan?"

"Oh, it's nothing much Naruto-kun. It's just that, well..."

"What is it Hinata-chan? Whatever it is you can tell me."

"Oh, well it's just that I've been dreaming about being Mrs. Uzumaki Hinata since I was a little girl. But I suppose being called Namikaze Hinata will have a nice ring to it as well."

He stared at her for a second before he burst out laughing.

As he was daydreaming some shouts brought him back to the present. Through the open gates streamed no less than twenty Suna ANBU. After their previous visit no chances were being taken. Gaara, Kankuro, and Matsuri were quickly greeted by Temari and then by everyone else.

Seeing Naruto Gaara approached him with a small smile. "Uzumaki Naruto, it is good to see you again my friend."

"Hey Gaara, it's good to see you too. Oh, but I'm not going by that name anymore."

"Really?" Gaara asked.

Naruto nodded. "I've taken my family name, I'm Namikaze Naruto now."

Gaara quirked what would have been an eyebrow. "Does that mean you are related to the Fourth Hokage, Namikaze Minato?"

Naruto nodded. "I'm his son and only surviving member of Namikaze."

"Then it seems we have yet another thing in common." Gaara said calmly. "I am the son of the Fourth Kazekage and you are the son of the Fourth Hokage."

It figured that Gaara would take such news in stride.

"Say Gaara, how would you and Matsuri like to stay with me and Hinata at our new mansion? There's plenty of room and we'd welcome your company."

Despite having warmed a bit Gaara was still not used to such invitations from a friend and hesitated. "Are you sure it would not inconvenience you?"

"Are you kidding? It would be great!" Naruto said enthusiastically.

Seeing Naruto's pleasure Gaara cast aside his doubts and nodded. "I accept your invitation, Namikaze Naruto."

Heading back to the Nara residence Temari pulled her brother aside where Shikamaru could not overhear them.

"All right, listen you," Temari whispered. "You're going to be staying with my future in laws. These are people I love and respect, you had *better* be on your best behavior."

Kankuro gave her a wide smile. "Oh of course I will."

Somehow this failed to reassure her.

6

Yoshino went downstairs to the kitchen to get breakfast started. As soon as she entered she froze. "What are you doing?"

Kankuro looked over to her and gave her a smile. "Oh just getting some milk." He lifted the carton and began drinking again.

Yoshino crossed the kitchen floor and yanked the milk carton out of his grasp. "If you want milk please pour it into a cup first. We don't drink straight from the carton in this house."

"Sorry about that, it's a habit."

Yoshino stared at him. "Also, we get dressed before coming downstairs." He was wearing nothing but some dirty boxers. Strangely though he still had his face paint on.

"Heh, right," he left the kitchen scratching his butt.

5

Yoshino entered the bathroom and froze. What was that odor? Investigating she quickly turned up her nose in disgust as she pressed down on the metal handle.

4

It was three in the morning. The loud laughter had woken everyone in the house. When Kankuro stumbled in drunk and with a pretty girl with long orange hair, large breasts, and a short skirt, the whole family was waiting for him.

"Man this is going to be troublesome," Shikamaru yawned.

Temari glared at him furiously. "I don't believe you! Who is she?"

Kankuro swayed a bit as he answered. "This is the beautiful and very talented Ormi."

"Orihime," the girl corrected.

"How old are you?" Yoshino asked frostily.

"Sixteen."

"Nice!" Shikaku sent Kankuro a big thumbs up. At least until he saw the glare coming from his wife. "I mean that's awful."

Yoshino turned to the buxom girl. "I think you should go home."

"Now wait a minute," Kankuro began to argue but effectively stopped when Yoshino grabbed a hold of his ear as though about to tear it off. "Ow! Ow! Ow! Let go!"

"You listen to me!" Yoshino somehow managed not to yell. "My home is not a brothel! You will not bring strange women into this house!"

"Ow! So my sister gets to have sex here but not me?"

"WHAT?!" Temari immediately began beating up her brother.

2

"So this is a local tradition huh?" Kankuro asked dubiously.

"Oh it sure is," Shikamaru replied.

"You're not considered a real man until you go through it." Shikaku said. "The ninja who couldn't do this wouldn't show his face for shame."

"Really?" Kankuro said. "Because it sounds kind of dumb to me. I mean who hunts with a cloth sack?"

"But that's the whole point," Shikamaru explained. "Snipe aren't really dangerous, but they're fast and oh so very clever. So catching one with nothing but a sack is considered a true sign of manhood."

"And all of you leaf nins do this?"

"That's right," Shikaku said.

"Even Naruto managed to bag a snipe his very first time out." Shikamaru exclaimed.

Kankuro grunted. "Well if he can do it then I definitely can. So what do these snip look like?"

"They're about two feet long with floppy ears and sharp pointed teeth." Shikamaru advised earnestly.

"They have bright red fur and long spiny tails and can jump five feet into the air." Shikaku added.

"And they make this, 'yip, yip, yip' sound." Shikamaru said.

"Yip, yip yip?" Kankuro repeated. Shikamaru nodded vigorously.

"Now they'll be running wild all night through the forest," Shikaku advised. "Don't come back until you bag one or we'll have to tell everyone."

"Good luck," Shikamaru said as he and his father left Kankuro alone in the forest.

"Did he actually buy it?" Temari asked as soon as the two of them returned.

"He sure did," Shikaku said.

"Sucker!" Temari said happily.

1

Temari slipped into his bed. Somehow he was not surprised.

"We're not having sex, so don't even try." She warned him.

"You having trouble sleeping?" he asked her.

"Yeah, I'm way too excited. I mean everything we've been through over the last three years has led us to this." She looked over to him curiously. "Aren't you nervous too?"

"Nope, not even a little."

She smiled. "Let me guess, being nervous would just be too troublesome right?"

She was actually surprised when he shook his head. "No, it's just that I know that tomorrow I get to marry the only woman I will ever love. So what is there to be nervous about?"

She looked at him and smiled.

"Now try and get some sleep, after all I am the world's best pillow right?"

She snorted. "Well it's good to know you're useful for something."

After only a few minutes she was fast asleep.

The day

It was an absolutely beautiful day. The Nara estates were filled with honored guests and friends. The fact that the Nara's were springing for an open bar certainly helped. Along with human guests there were also about a dozen deer present. They were mostly nibbling on the grass or on some of the flowers. Since the Nara considered the deer to be family members their presence was considered not only normal but welcome.

As the time approached Tsunade took her place before all the seated guests. She was in her pristine white and red Hokage robes. She nodded to Shizune, who motioned for the band to begin the march.

Gaara extended his arm. "Are you ready for this Temari?"

In her right hand she held her bouquet. She carefully placed her left hand on her brother's arm. "I am."

Hiashi extended his arm and gave his daughter a rare and genuine smile. "I know if your mother were here Hinata, she would be as happy and proud as I am."

She placed her left hand on his arm. "Thank you father."

Asuma stood beside Shikamaru. "Please don't try and run, as best man I would have to be the one to bring you back."

"You don't need to worry; running away would be way too troublesome."

Iruka smiled, he could not have been prouder if it were his own son. "Are you nervous Naruto?"

He shook his head and smiled. "No, I can't wait."

As Naruto stood there with his best man Jiraiya approached him already smelling of alcohol. "Very last chance to save your freedom kid."

Naruto rolled his eyes. "And end up like you ero-sennin? No thanks."

"Come on kid, just say the word and I'll show you a little resort town where the sake is warm and the women are all hot."

"Jiraiya," Tsunade said sweetly. "Sit down and shut up, I'd rather not have to murder you in front of all these witnesses."

At the top of the aisle the two brides began the long slow walk towards the men they loved. They both wore white silk wedding kimonos. Their hair was done up and their faces were covered with white face powder and blush.

As Naruto looked at his beautiful Hinata he wondered just how he could have ever even looked at anyone else.

Shikamaru looked at his Temari and still felt no fear. He had long ago resigned himself to the fact that no matter how scary she was, she was the one and always would be. Nothing she could ever do could be as scary as the thought of not being with her.

When the two brides came to the end of the aisle their escort took their hands and with slow ceremony placed them on the extended arms of their loved ones.

With a smile Tsunade took out the ceremonial bottle sake and filled two small bowls.

"Share in this drink as the two of you will share in all of life's joys and hardships." Tsunade intoned.

She handed one of the bowls to Naruto and the other to Shikamaru. They both took a small sip and passed the bowl to their brides. Hinata also took a small sip while Temari's was more of a gulp.

"Have you come here to devote yourselves to one another of your own free will?" The Hokage questioned.

"Yes," Naruto answered solemnly.

"Hai," Hinata said.

"Yes," said Shikamaru.

"Yes," said Temari.

The Hokage looked out sternly upon the assembled guests. "Can any here give just cause why these people should not be joined in sacred marriage?"

Kankuro suddenly developed a loud cough just then, but no one actually objected. Satisfied Tsunade returned her attention to the ceremony. "Do you understand that the vows you make this day are spoken before Kami and before all those who have come here to bear witness?"

"Yes," Naruto and Shikamaru said.

"Yes," Hinata and Temari said.

"Then speak the vows, and speak only the truth."

Smiling Iruka held out a pair of gold rings. Naruto took the smaller of the two gold rings. He then carefully slid it on to Hinata's left hand as he spoke.

"My wife, in sickness and in health I promise that I will love you, respect you, console you, be faithful to you, and protect you. From this day on until the day of my death, this I do swear."

With her hands trembling slightly Hinata took the other wedding band and placed it on Naruto's left hand.

"My husband, in sickness and in health I promise that I will love you, respect you, console you, be faithful to you, and protect you. From this day on until the day of my death, this I do swear."

Asuma held out the rings. With slow and careful hand Shikamaru slid one onto Temari's finger.

"My wife, in sickness and in health I promise that I will love you, respect you, console you, be faithful to you, and protect you. From this day on until the day of my death, this I do swear."

Temari took the other gold ring and with only the slightest shake was able to put it on Shikamaru's hand.

"My husband, in sickness and in health I promise that I will love you, respect you, console you, be faithful to you, and protect you. From this day on until the day of my death, this I do swear."

The Hokage held her hand up. "May Kami grant you the blessings of health, happiness, and children. May your unions be long and lasting. I declare that you are all now husband and wife." She smiled and nodded to both couples. "You may kiss your brides."

They were only too happy to do so.

"May I present to you," Tsunade called out. "Namikaze Naruto and his bride, Namikaze Hinata, as well as Nara Shikamaru and his bride Nara Temari."

There was loud applause in celebration. Then Jiraiya stood up and shouted two magical words that filled the crowd with joy.

"Open bar!"

"So you don't know how to cook fish?" The old man said with a too serious expression.

"Not really," Tsunade answered with a weak grin as she tried to come up with a polite way to escape.

From their spot on the dance floor Shikamaru and Temari looked at the Hokage's obvious distress and smiled evilly.

Temari leaned in close and put her head on Shikamaru's chest. "We actually made it, we're married."

Shikamaru grinned and nodded. "I know."

"So what do you think the future holds?"

"To be honest, I have no idea at all, but I'm sure that it will be troublesome."

Thirteen Years Later

Temari filled seven bowls of oatmeal. "Where is she?" Temari put the empty pot in the sink. Going to the kitchen door she opened it and gave a loud shout. "Tsubaki! Breakfast is ready!"

"Mom you're being really loud and troublesome." An eleven year old miniature copy of Shikamaru said. Shikataoru was his father's son.

Not only in looks but in personality. He was a lazy genius who loved shogi, clouds, sleeping, and who hated pretty much anything that required effort. His two favorite words were 'troublesome' and 'so.'

She gave her oldest boy a look that earned her a roll of his eyes. "If your sister would get down here on time I wouldn't have to shout."

"She's *always* late mom." Her daughter Hana stated. Hana was ten and the middle child. She seemed to always need to get attention and to prove herself, usually against her older sister. She was very pretty with green eyes and dark hair she wore in a single long ponytail. She had no talent with wind but had shadow jutsus.

A green eyed and blonde haired eight year old sat next to her. Unlike his father and older brother Shikalo didn't keep his hair in a top knot. He preferred to keep his slightly long hair loose and uncombed. It gave him a bit of a wild look that he, and certain girls, treasured. "Well she is the strongest girl in the family so she deserves special treatment." He said innocently.

"She is not!" Hana declared loudly.

"Suuuuure." Shikalo said with a mischievous grin. The boy lived for drama and had an absolute gift for knowing just what buttons to push in people, especially his sisters. His brother Shikataoru drove him insane as no matter what he did he could never get a rise out of him. He was the only one of the children not to receive the Nara blood line. As if to make up for that he had very strong wind affinity, possibly stronger than Tsubaki's. He tended to drive his mom a bit crazy by refusing to train with a fan to better focus his ability. He considered it too girly.

"No fighting you two." Temari sat down.

"Mom can we eat?" That came from five year old Kaze. Kaze was easily the sweetest and kindest of all her children. How the girl had managed to acquire that personality from her parents was a mystery. She had brown eyes and dark hair that she wore loose down to her

shoulders. She had the Nara blood line but it was too early to know if she had any talent with wind. She was also the only one of the girls who still played with a doll.

Temari smiled at her littlest. "Let's give your sister just a couple more minutes."

Just then the kitchen door flew open. Stomping into the kitchen came a twelve year old in a lavender and pink outfit with short skirt, patches of fishnet on her legs, blonde hair tied back in four short ponytails, and a closed fan slung over her shoulder.

"I am the mighty Tsubaki, wind and shadow mistress of the forest!" She proclaimed loudly.

Her entire family stared at her.

Shikataoru sighed. "I can already tell this is going to be *really* troublesome."

"Tsubaki! What is that on your face?" Temari got to her feet.

Her oldest gave her a big smile. "It's war paint! It helps bring out my inner warrior!" She answered proudly.

"Mom! She's wearing lipstick!" Hana said outraged.

"Tsubaki! Did you use my lipstick to put all those lines on your face?"

Her daughter didn't bother to deny the obvious. "Don't you want me to be as strong as possible today?"

"Training makes you stronger! Putting lipstick all over your face only makes you look ridiculous!"

"Uncle Kankuro does it!"

"My point exactly," Temari said.

"I bet she's just trying to wear lipstick for Sasuke." Shikalo teased.

"Shut up! Sasuke-kun has nothing to do with it!" Tsubaki said.

"You know if he sees you like this he'll probably think you're an even bigger freak than he does now." Shikalo added.

"What?! You little jerk!" Tsubaki moved towards her little brother only to have her mother intercept her.

"Tsubaki wash your face and then come back for breakfast."

"Mom I told you this helps bring out my inner warrior!"

"It brings out your inner clown." Temari stated.

"Uncle Kankuro wears it!" Tsubaki dug in her heels.

"He also plays with life sized dolls." Temari shot back.

"I am not taking it off!" Tsubaki stated.

"Oh yes you are!" Temari promised.

"Honey," Shikamaru finally decided to speak up. "You are such a pretty girl why do you want to hide behind all those red lines? Do you *really* want to look like your uncle Kankuro?"

Tsubaki's obstinacy disappeared. "O.k. daddy!" She went over to her father and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I'll take it off." And out of the kitchen she went.

Temari sent her husband a look that was half amused and half annoyed. " *You* she listens to."

Shikamaru shrugged. "I have a way with blondes." Both his wife and Shikalo gave him a fishy look.

"You know she's going to be even worse when she passes her exam." Temari noted.

"Is that possible?" Shikamaru asked.

"Mommy can we *please* eat now?" Kaze implored.

Temari smiled at her youngest and sat back down. "Sure honey."

"You haven't forgotten about the party tonight have you Shikamaru?" Naruto pestered him.

The Rokudaime's Chief Advisor rolled his eyes at him. "No Naruto I haven't forgotten. The whole family is looking forward to it, especially Tsubaki."

Naruto gave him one of his huge smiles. "I bet I know why."

Shikamaru mumbled something that rhymed with bubble some.
"Naruto you need to go through some reports."

"Mission reports?" He asked eagerly.

But Shikamaru shook his head. "No, budgetary reports you need to determine where this quarter's surplus should be invested."

"Augh!" Naruto looked as though he had just been poisoned. "I hate those! Why do I have to read them anyway? I'll just end up doing what you say anyway."

"You're the Hokage; you should at least be familiar with the village's finances."

"But it's so boring!" Naruto whined. "I feel like I'm trapped in one of Iruka-sensei's lectures. You know I never imagined being Hokage could ever be so boring."

"Boring is good Naruto."

"Oh come on Shika! Don't you miss the good old days? You know *before* I became Hokage?"

He gave the Hokage a flat look that his wife would have been proud of. "Which good old days? When we were fighting for our lives against Sound, Lightning, and Earth? Or were you thinking of that time the Akatsuki captured you and we just *barely* rescued you in time."

That memory made him shudder. "Still you have to admit those times were exciting! Since I became Hokage things have gotten really boring!"

"Naruto the past six years have been great! We are at peace, we have strong and loyal allies in Sand and Mist, our economy is booming, and with the Akatsuki, Orcinus, and Orochimaru gone there are no serious threats to the peace. Naruto you may get to reign for a very long time without any more wars or major crises."

Naruto was less than thrilled. "Great."

Since Shikamaru was the Hokage's Chief Advisor and Temari was one of Hinata's best friends they and the kids had visited the Namikaze estates many times. But tonight's celebration for the academy graduates was different. Out on the lawn a band was playing and couples were dancing. There were a dozen long tables loaded down with food and drink. In a roped off section near the rose garden a petting zoo and pony rides had been provided. Later there would be fireworks. Before leaving Temari had made sure each of her children had their Nara's heart with them. Each of them had pulled out the silver onyx pendant they had been given shortly after their births. She doubted any of them would get lost but she liked knowing they could be quickly found at any time. Under the watchful eyes of the ANBU a small crowd wandered the Namikaze grounds. As soon as they had arrived Kaze had made a straight run for the petting zoo and the bunnies there. Other parents had brought their younger children as well so Hana and Shikalo sought out some of

their classmates. Shikataoru thought it would be too troublesome to track down other kids from his class so stuck by his parents. Tsubaki was also near them, though she was bouncing up and down anxiously scanning the crowd. She had her new hitai-ite around her neck.

Shikamaru leaned over to his wife so he could whisper to her. "Why is Tsubaki wearing lipstick and make up? I thought we both agreed she was still too young."

His wife sighed. "I made a deal with her. She promised to never put on 'face paint' again if I let her wear regular make up."

Shikamaru chuckled. "What do you want to bet that was what she was after the whole time?"

Temari shrugged. "It wouldn't surprise me she's a good strategist."

"Must get it from her dad."

"Yeah right." Temari teased.

"Sasuke-kun!" Tsubaki shouted and dived into the crowd.

"That girl," Temari shook her head. "She always goes after what she wants full bore."

"Now *that* she gets from her mom." Shikamaru commented.

Temari smiled at her husband and laughed.

"Iruka-sensei!" Naruto greeted the man who had been and remained his father figure.

"Naruto!" Iruka smiled. All his precious people knew he preferred to be addressed by his name and not his title. "It's good to see you outside the Tower for a change."

"I know what you mean. I hate having to schedule a meeting with the Director of Education just so we can have our weekly ramen."

Iruka smiled fondly. "Do you remember the time I bought you ramen after you painted the Hokage monument?"

"Of course! I also remember what a great motivator it was for getting me to clean it up." Naruto paused for a bit. "Say Iruka, when I told you that night that I was going to be Hokage did you think I ever would?"

"No," Iruka grinned a bit to see Naruto deflate. "But the next night when I saw what you did to Mizuki I knew you had the stuff to be Hokage one day."

"Well of course!" Naruto said happily.

"Dad! Help!" The two of them looked up. A familiar twelve year old boy was running towards them. He had spiky blonde hair, lavender pupil less eyes, smooth skin and cheeks, a shiny new hitai-ite around his forehead, and a black jump suit with a thin stripe of orange running along the side.

"What is it Sasuke?" Naruto asked.

His son ducked behind him. "Dad you have to save me! She's crazy!"

"Who?" Naruto asked.

"Oh Sasuke-kun there you are!" Nara Tsubaki came running over.

Naruto chuckled. "My son the heart throb."

"Must run in the family." Iruka commented.

Naruto gave him a look of profound denial. "I didn't have any girls interested in me at that age."

Iruka shook his head. "You had *one* who was *very* interested in you, even if you didn't know it at the time." Naruto could only nod ruefully.

Tsubaki came to a halt in front of the Hokage. "Oh hi Sasuke-kun! I was hoping you'd be here tonight."

"I live here you crazy girl." Namikaze Sasuke answered while making sure to keep his dad between him and her.

"Do you notice anything different about me Sasuke-kun?"

"Well you have your hitai-ite on obviously."

She smiled. "I also have make up on." She batted her eyelashes at him. "Does it make me look more beautiful?"

"No," he said flatly. "You look the same as always." The girl dropped her head crushed.

The Hokage shook his head. "Son you don't understand a woman's heart at all."

Iruka grinned. "He's only twelve Naruto. It took you awhile to figure things out too."

Tsubaki lifted her head as the band began playing a new tune. "Oh! That's my very favorite song!" She let out a long depressed sigh. "I sooo wish I had someone to dance with."

Naruto reached behind him and put a hand on his son's shoulder. "Son dance with her."

"Daaaad!" The boy sent his father a look of betrayal.

"Have just one dance with her, I promise it won't kill you." His son opened his mouth to argue. "That's a command from the Hokage."

Reaching out she took a firm hold of Sasuke's hand. "You heard the Hokage!" She began dragging him to the dance area.

When they got there he put his hands on her hips and she put hers on his strong shoulders. "I'm only doing this because of my dad." Sasuke told her as they began to move to the music.

"Sure!" She said happily.

"I'm only dancing with you for the one song."

"Fine!"

He frowned at her. "You know I never would have guessed that this was your favorite song."

She gave him a wink. "It's not."

"Temari-chan how are you?" Hinata called as she approached.

"Hinata-chan, I'm just fine. How are you dear?"

"I'm a little tired from putting everything together for the party but otherwise I'm fine. How are you Shikamaru-kun?"

Shikamaru smiled and nodded. "I'm fine."

From behind Hinata came an eleven year old girl. She had long dark blue hair and lavender eyes. She looked very much like her mother. "Uhm... hello Shikataoru." The girl immediately began pressing her index fingers together.

"Oh, hey Hitoma are you as happy as me to have school over for the summer?"

"Umm... sort of. I umm... kind of miss seeing everyone though."

Shikataouru shrugged. "You can still see them outside of class."

"Umm... of course."

Shikataouru leaned in and put the palm of his hand on her forehead. "Are you feeling all right Hitoma? You look kind of flushed."

"Umm... I'm all right." She took a deep breath and tried to not pass out as he touched her.

Hinata smiled at her shy little daughter. "Shikataoru would you like to go inside and play some shogi with her? I know Hitoma would like that."

Shikataoru shrugged. "Sure, come on Hitoma." The little girl let out an 'eep' as he took hold of her hand and led the way. The three adults all chuckled as they watched.

"Hey Naruto." Shikamaru slid up to him.

"Hey Shikamaru where's Temari?"

"She's with Hinata right now. Wasn't Iruka here a minute ago?"

"Yeah, he went to find Shizune and their girls."

Shikamaru nodded as he looked out to where people were dancing. "Looks like everyone is here tonight."

There were Asuma and Kurenai. Their oldest son Saru was away on a mission in Grass country. Their two other boys were around somewhere.

There was Ino. She was watching the couples dancing longingly as she stood there off to the side. He seriously doubted she'd come here with a date. She hadn't been out on a real date in about three years. He hadn't talked to her in awhile. He made a mental note to invite her over for dinner sometime this week. He worried about her but didn't know what to do. Irmana had been devastated but she was

now happily married with three kids. Irmana had been deeply hurt, but had managed to heal. Ino hadn't.

There were his mom and dad. They were both starting to go grey. Dad had managed to pick up a few more scars and mom had picked up a few more pounds. Dad refused to retire even though mom was getting troublesome about it. Still they were happy together and they both adored their grandchildren. He and Temari never had trouble finding baby sitters.

His eyes were drawn to a small ruckus. He was not surprised to see Tsunade standing over a prostrate Jiraiya shaking her fist and clearly yelling at the man. Shikamaru rolled his eyes and wondered what he had said *this* time. He wondered if any other ninja village had a pair of council members as troublesome as those two. Despite their near constant complaints though he had noticed that the two of them spent an awful lot of time together.

Neji and Tenten were dancing. As was their son Hizashi. Like Tsubaki and Sasuke, Hizashi was a brand new graduate. In fact he had come in second behind Sasuke for the top spot. Hizashi seemed to be in good spirits as he danced with a pretty dark haired girl. Since Naruto had outlawed the caged bird seal and ended the formal division within Hyuga Neji and his son had become much easier going.

Then there were Sakura and Lee. Shikamaru let out a depressed sigh. They had *finally* gotten married a couple years ago. They were Konoha's sort of couple. They were sort of in love. They were sort of happy. They were sort of damaged. Sakura had never and probably would never get completely over the loss of her first love. Lee had been destroyed by their original break up and by the knowledge that she had only turned to him because Sasuke was gone. They did still

care for each other despite all of that. Ultimately they had found their way back to one another. And looking at them now as they danced they certainly seemed happy. From a distance at any rate.

Shikamaru turned back to Naruto. "You know we're both lucky to have found our wives."

Naruto nodded vigorously. "Oh I know believe me. I don't even want to imagine what life would be like without my Hinata-chan. Ever wonder what life would be like without Temari?"

Shikamaru chuckled. "It would be much more restful and far less troublesome. But it would also be much less amazing. So I think I'll keep her."

"Oh really?"

Turning around he saw Temari with an amused look on her face and Hinata covering her mouth to suppress a giggle. "Hey honey." He said.

His wife shook her head but came over to his side as Hinata went over to Naruto's. "You'll keep me huh?"

He shrugged. "Well finding someone else I would love as much as you would just be too troublesome."

Temari gave him a small smile. "Guess I'm lucky you're so lazy then." She paused for a bit. "Now honey you know Gaara is coming to visit us next month and that he's bring Matsuri and all three children."

"Of course, it's a major state visit. I'm looking forward to seeing them."

She took a deep breath. "Kankuro is coming too."

"What?! Since when?"

"Since always." She said calmly.

"This visit's been planned for five months."

"I was waiting for just the right time to tell you." She decided to go ahead and get all the bad news out of the way. "He wants to stay with us again."

Shikamaru frowned, his usual good mood nowhere to be seen. "You mention this *after* our daughter puts on face paint?"

"He loves our children."

"Couldn't he love them from a distance? Like from a hotel... in Suna?"

"I hardly ever get to see him."

"That's a bad thing? Temari he's a terrible influence on the kids! He'll spend the entire week spoiling them and telling them how to get away with things."

"Oh come on, he doesn't have any children of his own."

"I wonder why."

She sent him a hard look and crossed her arms over her chest. "He's my brother." That was her trump card and they both knew it.

Shikamaru looked as if he'd swallowed a lemon. "Fine."

"I knew you'd understand!" She hugged him and gave him a kiss. He gave her a look that said he didn't understand but wouldn't argue any further.

"Yo."

"Kakashi sensei," Naruto greeted. "So where's the ball and chain?"

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata scolded.

"Oops, sorry. So where's the psycho you're shacking up with?"

Kakashi smiled. "Standing right behind you, hey Anko." He gave a cheerful wave.

"Ack!" Naruto jumped around. "I didn't mean it!" There was of course no one there. Everyone around him had a good laugh.

"That was not funny Kakashi." Naruto pouted.

"I would have to disagree."

"Kakashi," Hinata asked. "When are you and Anko going to finally get married?"

"Probably the day after she decides she wants to."

"You are so whipped." Shikamaru said.

Kakashi shrugged. "What can I say? The sex is amazing."

Tsubaki and Sasuke approached the group. She was hanging on his arm and had stars in her eyes. "Thank you for dancing with me Sasuke-kun." Before he could object she planted a kiss on his cheek.

He gave the girl a very firm look. "O.k. I danced with you for three songs. Now you have to keep our deal and leave me alone the rest of the night."

"Of course Sasuke-kun! I always keep my promises." She gave him one of her big smiles that forced her eyes closed. "Just like I promise to eventually make you my boyfriend."

"Hah! That'll never happen you crazy girl!"

"You'll change your mind once we get to spend more time together."

"The only way I'd do that is if we were on the same squad and there is *no* way that's going to happen!"

Kakashi, Naruto, and the other adults all shared a conspiratorial little smile.

Another team seven with a Sasuke, an obsessed fan girl, and Kakashi-sensei. Naruto thought fondly. I better remember when I give them their first C-rank no missions to Wave and no bridge builders!

A lone sky rocket rose into the night and exploded leaving behind gold in the night sky. It was a signal that the fireworks were about to start. As if on cue their children all gathered around them. Temari picked Kaze up and held her as Shikamaru put one arm around her and one around an excited and bouncing Tsubaki. As the fireworks began and their children began to ooh and ahh Shikamaru and Temari shared a look. Their lives were not perfect. They had the stresses of family and career and also had the occasional argument. But they both knew their home was a happy one and filled with love. Neither of them would ever want to be anywhere else.

"I love you." She said spontaneously.

He leaned in so they could share a small kiss underneath the lights in the sky. "I love you too."

In the end that said it all.

THE END